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Stress Management and Coping Strategies in Undergraduate Students at a Midwestern State University

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Abstract

This qualitative interview study explored the experiences in a purposive sample of nontraditional and traditional undergraduate students, examining their current stressors and how coping strategies to manage stress developed. The study used Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory in conceptualizing experiences with stress and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping in defining coping strategies. Four themes emerged indicating that participants used a variety of coping strategies towards maintaining or improving their mental health. Implications for practice are provided to facilitate increased understanding by student affairs professionals of undergraduate students' coping strategies and stress management.

Key words: Coping, stress, strategies, mental health, college, students

For many undergraduate students, college is a developmental period that facilitates affective, cognitive, and behavioral growth. This period is also significant because most mental health concerns emerge between the ages of 15 and 24, the initial onset of most lifespan mental health issues occurs near the age of 24, and mental health issues account for approximately one-half of the diseases in young adults (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Nam et al., 2013). The undergraduate experience facilitates transition around mental health which challenges students as they navigate and assume increased independence and personal responsibilities. Many traditional undergraduate students struggle to fully engage and manage their initial college transition and the struggle continues throughout their undergraduate experience (Aselton, 2012; Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012).

This college adjustment occurs over the course of their undergraduate experience as they are attempting to gain an understanding of their own selfhood and socially integrate into the collegiate environment (Aselton, 2012). Students must adjust to academic, social, personal, and financial changes, all of which have the potential to create new stressors for students (Baqutayan & Mai, 2012). College has been considered to be one of the most stressful time periods in an individual's life (Bland et al., 2012) which has been connected to an increase in anxiety and depression levels in undergraduate students (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2016; Czyz, Horwitz, Eisenberg, Kramer, & King, 2013), increased family conflict (Zaleski, Levey-Thors, & Schiaffino, 2010), and feelings of helplessness or isolation (ACHA, 2016). Even when students do not have a diagnosed mental health issue, they often struggle to manage their behavioral or emotional responses to stress or other mental health concerns, which are often referred to as coping strategies.

Coping strategies are the positive or negative behaviors, actions, and thoughts an individual performs to manage a stressful situation (Baqutayan & Mai, 2012). Each decision is accompanied by benefits and risks to one's mental health and academic life. The way a student manages a situation is dependent on individual differences and the stress of the situation (Zaleski et al., 2010). Students' failure to effectively cope with stressful situations has been connected to excessive alcohol use, smoking, eating disorders, or other mental health issues (Bland et al., 2012). Despite an understanding of coping, we do not have a deeper, fully conceptualized comprehension of how students transition through college and manage stressful situations regarding the undergraduate experience. This is valuable knowledge to obtain at the individual

level and the university level, which may inform student development and retention of undergraduates.

. This qualitative study examined the interview responses of undergraduate students, examining their current stressors and how their coping strategies developed to manage stress. This study was informed by Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory which is a psychological model that aids in understanding how individuals react to major stress or transitions in their life, and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping to define coping strategies. The use of these theories provided a better understanding of the mental process that individuals undergo in a time of stress and confusion and informs how students cope with stressful situations, which offers important implications about the factors associated with students' coping strategies.

Theoretical Framework

This study used two theoretical lenses, Schlossberg's transition theory (1995, 2011) and Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping (1984), to conceptualize the phenomena of stress and coping.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

The experience of significant life transitions can impact students' personal behavior, development, and mental health (Schlossberg, 1995). Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory provided a psychological framework to understand the reactions and adjustments individuals make as they go through life transitions. Key to the theory are four S's (situation, self, support, and strategies) which relate to how individuals cope with transitions. Situation refers to the individual's situation during the time of transition, specifically what other stress is presented (Schlossberg, 1995). Self refers to an individual's self-esteem and its impact on coping with the situation (Schlossberg, 1995). Supports refers to the perceived support available during the time of transition and is recognized to have a significant impact on the individual's coping process (Schlossberg, 1995). Strategies refer to the coping strategies and mechanisms developed during the transition period (Schlossberg, 2011). These coping strategies attempt to change the situation and reduce the amount of stress felt by the individual. These strategies can be separated into three categories: 1) strategies that attempt to modify the situation to alter the source of stress, 2) strategies that seek to control the meaning of the problem to suppress the perceived threat, and 3) strategies that aid in managing stress once it has occurred (Schlossberg, 2011; DeVilbiss, 2014).

The type of transition, the degree one's life has been changed, and the resources one uses to cope with the situation are all related to the success of the transition (Schlossberg, 1995; 2011). Although transition is often only considered as unidirectionally negative, Schlossberg (1995, 2011) noted that transitions can be positive yet still cause stress. An example of eustress (good stress) for college students could be becoming a resident assistant, which is ultimately developmentally positive (2011). In this study, Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory was used to conceptualize the experiences of students with stress and their use of coping strategies, and as a guide to help develop an understanding of students' reactions to significantly stressful situations. As part of this, the theory was used to create a semi-structured interview guide and to interpret the findings.

Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) established the concept of coping strategies. Lazarus (1966) initially conceptualized the idea of coping and stress. Stress defines the individual reaction to a situation that is perceived as challenging or surpassing one's available resources and threatening to one's well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress refers to situations that require individuals to adjust and manage through emotions and problems associated with the event (Carlson, 1997). Carlson (1997) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984) recognized harm and/or loss, threat, and challenge as three main aspects of stress.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as the continuously changing cognitive and behavioral efforts a person undergoes to adjust to external and internal issues that arise during stressful experiences. The coping strategies used by the individual are based on the intensity of the situation and one's attitude toward addressing the situation. Coping strategies are used to either alter the situation that is creating harm, threat, or challenge, or control individual responses to the stresses (Carlson, 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There are two essential types of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping occurs when an individual expects to change the situations that are causing stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion-focused coping emerges when a situation is causing harm, threat, or challenge to an individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In this study, Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping (1984) was selected to define coping and stress and to gain a better understanding of the multiple situations and variables that can cause stress and the reactions individuals have to stressful situations.

College students have many external and internal variables that can cause significant stress. The stress a student faces can cause multiple reactions and require students to adjust to manage the perceived stress. This theory guides understanding of the various types of stress and coping strategies one may use. The theory also informed the design of questions used in the semi-structured interview guide and was applied to those questions specifically associated with how students perceive stress and the benefits or consequences of the used coping strategies.

Literature Review

The reasons for the increasing numbers of students experiencing mental health issues is difficult to determine, but there have been multiple studies connecting stress to the prevalence of mental health issues (Hess & Tracey, 2013). The National College Health Assessment (ACHA, 2016) reported more than 33% of students reported symptoms of depression, 10% contemplated suicide, 50% of students met criteria for a DSM-IV mental health diagnosis particularly for mood and anxiety disorders (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). It has also been found that less than 25% of students were seeking treatment for anxiety and mood disorders (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010) and 20% of students who committed suicide sought the universities' mental health services (Czyz et al., 2013). These same students with mental health concerns from untreated mental health issues more commonly face additional problems associated with substance use, employment, academic achievement, and more (Nam et al., 2013). These individuals also experience great difficulty adjusting and developing healthy coping strategies (Bland et al., 2012; Mesidor & Sly, 2014). This is particularly salient among low-income and female populations (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

More specifically, it has been posited that the consistent stressful situations of college, coupled with unhealthy coping strategies, may increase the likelihood of students suffering from mental health issues (Bland et al., 2012; Eberhart & Hammen, 2010; Li & Yang, 2016). Traditional undergraduates often report that stress is caused by roommate issues, financial concerns, career concerns, and academic problems (Aselton, 2012). The stress many students feel can have significant consequences related to academic achievement and social relationships (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Specifically, within amorous relationships, stress often is caused by daily conflict which is correlated with anxious or avoidant attachment styles, reassurance seeking, and dependency behaviors (Eberhart & Hammen, 2010; Hays et al.,2015). These types

of attachment styles can have harmful outcomes for the individual and be unhealthy coping strategies.

Stress can be mitigated by other coping strategies. However, not all students use good coping strategies; fear of treatment, anticipated risks, desire to avoid discussing distress, experiencing painful feelings, and avoidance of social stigmas or negative judgements, have been associated with poor coping strategies (Nam et al., 2013). Stigma is found to be a substantial barrier to the diagnosis and treatment of mental health issues (Egbert, Miraldi, & Murniadi, 2014; Mesidor & Sly, 2014). Culture and religion can also impact coping strategies (Mesidor & Sly, 2014).

Czyz et al. (2013) reported two commonly cited reasons for students not engaging in healthy coping strategies: student belief that stress is typical in college and the lack of perceived need for help. A preference for solving their own issues was reported as the most significant deterrent to student development of effective coping strategies. This is consistent with Nam et al., (2013) who found that avoiding or seeking out mental health services during a transition are correlated with individual choice. Students who perceive their challenges as more severe and have a better understanding of their mental health issues have healthier coping strategies (Egbert et al., 2014; Lil, Dorstyn, & Denson, 2014).

If a student is having trouble assessing their own needs and experiencing many stressful situations, the student may develop unhealthy coping strategies, such as blaming others, drug and alcohol use, alcohol-impaired (drunk) driving, withdrawing from friends and college, and engaging in risky sexual activity (Clevenger-Wolford, Elmquist, Brem, Zapor, & Stuart, 2015; Zaleski et al., 2010; Li & Yang, 2016). This type of strategy was also identified as an external or avoidant coping strategy (Bland et al., 2012), and includes codependence, shopping, using social media networks, and eating to distract oneself from the situation without directly confronting the issue (Bland et al., 2012). This type of coping strategy is presumed to be negative and puts students at the risk of being unsuccessful during college (Zaleski et al., 2010). Other types of coping strategies in college undergraduates also may include those related to stress and self-esteem. Dating, relationships, academic pressure, and being accepted by peers could all result in a lack of self-esteem (Beylerian, 1993; Hess & Tracey, 2013). These students who are psychologically vulnerable are more prone to developing eating disorders such as binge eating or

purging through self-induced vomiting, laxatives, diuretics, fasting or excessive exercise, especially if they demonstrate difficulty adjusting to life-style changes (Beylerian, 1993).

Zaleski et al. (2010) found that moderated alcohol use was shown to be a positive coping strategy. Multiple studies have suggested that perceived social support was essential in developing healthy coping strategies and positive self-esteem, thereby leading to fewer mental health issues (Beylerian, 1993; Lamis, Ballard, May, & Dvorak, 2016; Zaleski et al., 2010). Social support was also connected to reducing hopelessness and the likelihood of experiencing suicidal ideations (Lamis et al., 2016).

Methods

Research Design

Using the framework provided by Patton (2015), this qualitative interview study sought to describe the perceptions of stress experienced by undergraduate students at a medium-sized, state supported Midwestern university through individual interviews using a semi-structured guide informed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Schlossberg (1995, 2011). This study was guided by research questions: (1) What are the significant stressors encountered by the interviewees during their college experience? (2) How do the undergraduate students in the study use coping strategies? and (3) When coping strategies fail, what alternative supports do the participants seek?

Participants

Using sampling methodology as outlined by Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) for college populations, an intentional purposive sample was constructed consisting of eight (n=8) undergraduate students who attended the same medium-sized, state-supported Midwestern university. All participants were recruited using chain-referral (snowball) sampling as outlined by Patton (2015).

Selection criteria included enrollment at the host institution, undergraduate status, and upperclassman academic level. Participants were recruited through email, text message, and in-person contact. Importantly, the experience of stress or interest in stress by participants was not a factor in the recruitment. Using what Sandelowski (2008) called informational redundancy (e.g. Francis et al., 2010; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) recruitment of participants was terminated after data saturation. Each of the participants was given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

Bob is a White sophomore male who self-identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Jen, a junior, was an African American woman who lived and worked on campus. Cody, also a junior, was a White, heterosexual male and a transfer student. Dave was a White male from Alabama currently studying philosophy in his junior year. Lynn was a White heterosexual female who was a Marketing major. Sally was a White female from an urban area who lived on campus and was active in student government. Maria was a White female finishing her senior year as a psychology major and business administration minor. She was a mother to an infant son. Finally, Ashley was a White female and single mother to two boys, completing her senior year as an accounting major.

Researcher Positionality

The primary investigator was aa cisgender White woman with a background in psychology and higher education. She has always been interested in stress, coping, and mental health. She previously struggled with developing helpful coping strategies. Additionally, she has experience working with individuals with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideations, eating disorders, and others. This served as motivation to complete this study to understand what stressors students were facing and how they were reacting to the stress felt. . The researcher believes that gaining information about stress perception and coping strategies can further the understanding of impacts and develop improvements to individual wellbeing.

The second researcher served to supervise the researcher and as an auditor for trustworthiness on the study. He identifies as a heterosexual, cisgender male with a bicultural identity orientation. The third researcher served as a contributing author and assisted with the research methodology. She identifies as a cisgender White woman.

Procedures

The research protocol was approved by the institutional review board before data collection began. A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on Schlossberg's (1995) and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theories. Reeves et al.'s (2008) theory was used as a lens for interpretation of the findings in the discussion. The questions pertained to participants' use of coping strategies, conceptualization of stress, stressful situations, self-perceptions, and level of support. The participants were also asked questions related to their utilization of positive and negative coping strategies. The interviews were semi-structured and probing questions varied slightly from participant to participant depending on rapport established during each

individual interview. Each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form before the interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in accessible and private spaces on campus at the host institution to ensure confidentiality. Each interview was audiotaped for quality transcription purposes and to prepare for data analysis.

Data Analysis

The study used thematic analysis (Glesne, 2015). Data analysis began with open coding to develop an initial codebook. Through multiple coding sessions, the list of open codes was summarized until saturation was reached, removing repeated and joining comparable codes. A list of focused codes was created and used for all interview transcripts. After focused coding of all transcripts, the codes were collapsed into overarching themes (Glesne, 2015).

Trustworthiness strategies were used according to Jones et al. (2014) which included an external auditor and clarification of researcher bias. The first strategy for validation was to use an external auditor to oversee the research. This person, a university professor within a student affairs graduate program, was not currently active as a student affairs professional, but had *a priori* experience and knowledge. A second strategy was to clarify researcher bias. The researcher positionality statement informs the reader of perspectives on the phenomenon being investigated.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the interview data. First, the participants described stress as overwhelming, even leading to depression and anxiety in some cases. Second, the participants experienced multiple sources of stress. Subthemes for this theme identify categories of stress as academic stressors, finances, family conflict, and relationship-related stress. The third theme is that participants had some common positive coping strategies, including spirituality, emotional sharing, and use of support systems. The final theme is that the participants also utilized what they characterized as unhelpful coping strategies. Each of these four themes is described in turn, below.

Theme 1: Stress as Overwhelming

The participants in this study were able to identify many different forms of stress, but all their responses connected stress to a strong negative feeling or emotion. For example, Ashley conveyed that stress is a part of life and that it can negatively affect many aspects of your life if it is not properly managed.

When I think of stress, the first thing that comes to my mind is overwhelmingness, anxiety, extremely unhealthy. I would say it's something that people deal with almost on a day-to-day basis, no matter their background or season of life, just in different degrees, I think. And so, I think there are different levels of stress.

Maria related stress to "anxiety or anything that makes her feel anxious." Lynn claimed that stress made her feel overwhelmed. Jen explained that stress is anything that keeps her from being happy or experiencing joy. Bob connected stress to many negative feelings and expressed that stress consumes his thoughts and makes it difficult for him to focus on anything else. He said:

When I think of stress, I generally tend to think it's the point you reach where you're no longer able to focus on the tasks that have been set before you. You constantly have a recurring thought in your head and it's something that make you feel as if things are not right or things aren't going well. Your body tends to react it. You feel nauseous, or you either want to eat, or you want to not eat, or you get upset, your head starts to pound, you want to cry. Just that feeling that there's something not right going on.

The stress was so overwhelming for some of the participants that it led to depression and/or anxiety. Specifically, Bob, Cody, Jen, Sally, and Ashley all expressed feeling depressed at some point in their college experience. Jen had a difficult time seeing her value and motivating herself. She expressed being unable to address her emotions and often just sat alone when she was feeling stressed. Cody felt extremely depressed during his breakup with his girlfriend. He explained that this situation made him feel a great deal of pain and he considered suicide: "I felt useless. It was the only time in my life I've ever considered suicide, yeah. That was the darkest time in my life by far."

Sally suffered from depression and anxiety during her college experience. She experienced a lack of support from her family, which made her reluctant to seek help for her mental health issues:

Because there's just so much build-up of stress and pressure and for me, especially, anxiety, that it's like – you can't look inside yourself and be like, "Okay, let's fix this." It's like, no. Like, my family said, 'You're fucked up.' Like, now what? I know I struggle with anxiety really bad. And it gets to a point where just everything, like that house of cards, everything just kind of builds up. I think I'm doing okay, but then another thing

will come over and just knock it all over. And at that point, it's when I'm basically screaming for help. I'm just like, 'Can somebody please just, like, acknowledge that I'm struggling at least? I just need some acknowledgement over here, like, help a sister out.'

Ashley and Bob described their experiences with depression as well. Ashley was very sad and was unable to make herself feel happy. Bob struggled with posttraumatic stress disorder and depression after a sexual assault and coming out as gay to his family.

I'll be flat honest, I felt disgusting. It's just something that you never really expect it to happen, it's just like – I just felt disgusting. I felt disgusted with myself that it happened, and it was just like – I felt untouchable. It's something that – and it's still something that it's just in the back of your head and it's something that you can have post-traumatic stress about. And it's effected how I've been in relationships after…But no. I felt disgusting. I felt like I was worthless, in both situations. One was worse, but even with my family, I felt unwanted. I felt hurt.

The quote from Bob, above, portrays classic symptoms of depression caused by multiple intersecting stressful and traumatic events. The second theme, below, outlines more thoroughly the various types of stressors experienced by the students.

Theme 2: Multiple Sources of Stress

The participants identified many different factors that caused stress. One category of stress was academic, including the problem of large amounts of work and difficulties with time management. Another common source of stress was finances, which affected some participants. Family issues were a third source of stress, including conflict with parents as well as stressors related to two of the students' own children. Finally, stress related to relationships was also prevalent, including both friendships and intimate relationships. Each of these subthemes is discussed in turn, below.

Academic stressors. Academics was a stressor for all the participants. Grade point average (GPA) requirements and the amount of out of class coursework required for each course impacted the amount of stress the students experienced. Ashley expressed feeling a lot of stress about her academics, especially in the previous spring semester. She labeled herself as a perfectionist and placed a great deal of pressure on herself to achieve the very high standards she set for herself, but she was able to recognize the level of stress this caused.

I think school's unhealthy to an extent because it's so stressful, but it's taught me a lot, just in like day-to-day life matters and issues. But, oh, my gosh, it was awful. It was terrible. I was so stressed out and overwhelmed because I wanted to maintain a GPA that was to a standard of perfection because I'm a perfectionist, and it was almost the death of me because perfection is unattainable. And so, it was really bad. It was really stressful.

Sally was experiencing a lot of stress because she had recently changed her major, but she was happy with her current one. Similarly, Jen had been struggling with her academics because she was still unable to decide what major or career she wanted. She had also been pondering the idea of remaining in college since she was so unsure of her major and her career goals. The pressure and stress she felt made her question her ability to continue with her education.

One aspect of academic stress was time management and procrastination. Dave expressed stress with balancing his campus involvement, work, and his academics. He really enjoyed being active in multiple student organizations and taking pride in his work environment, but he struggled with managing his time to ensure he was able to get all his assignments done. This has caused his GPA to be lower than he wanted.

I would say that homework definitely is something that you have to learn how to get yourself to do because we usually have at least two hours of homework every night, as a college student. But you also need to have a part-time job to support yourself. That's where it gets kind of hard. The job and then your homework at night, sometimes you don't have time to finish both of them and sometimes you have to stay up really late at night. Then that affects your sleep schedule.

Maria expressed that time management was one of her biggest struggles. She explained she continually waits until the last minute to complete assignments, even though she knows this causes her to feel more stressed. Bob and Cody also identified time management as a stressor connected to their academics and campus involvement. Bob stated he tries to be productive, but he struggles to manage his priorities and tasks associated with academics and extracurricular activities. Cody also expressed feeling stressed due to the number of responsibilities he faced. Cody explained he has a "nagging fear that I might be overextending myself and I might suffer for that." He felt stressed to do well in his academics and ensure he is active in campus activities, but he does not want to "do too much too fast."

Finances. Financial issues were another significant stress experienced by some of the participants. Participants discussed feeling pressure to earn a degree that would allow them to be able to gain meaningful employment. Additionally, the participants felt overwhelmed by the bills and payments required to continue with their education. Jen explained lack of money in her bank account and the amount due on her credit card bill caused her significant stress. Lynn described struggling with making payments for various items, but reducing hours worked due to school requirements. School is her main priority, which does not allow her to have a very flexible work schedule, which in turn limits the monetary funds she has available. Ashley expressed financial issues one as her biggest stressor during their college experience.

> I'm very money-conscious because I don't have a lot of it. That's another huge stress. That's probably another thing that's contributed a lot to my stress, not having the means to like, 'My kids need socks. Crap, I don't have money to go,' like stupid stuff like that. That's a big thing that really breaks my heart and bothers me a lot, but it's getting better because I'm almost done.

Family conflict. The participants in this study were asked to identify and explain an extremely stressful situation they experienced during college. One of the common themes within the described situations was issues with family conflict. Several of the participants have experienced extremely stressful situations involving their family.

For example, Bob stated that one of the most stressful situations he experienced was coming out to his family. His family was very unsupportive of his sexual identity and they were outraged when he told them he was gay. They responded to him with anger and sadness. Additionally, he added they continue to "pray for him to change" and had not attempted to be even slightly supportive of his sexual identity. This situation was even more stressful for Bob because he was a commuter student and lived with his family. He expressed that his family is still unsupportive and does not accept him. This caused Bob to feel insecure about himself and disconnected from his family.

> But I think the most stressful thing about it is that feeling of judgement of just not being accepted as the person that you are because we have this idea that family is supposed to love, and support, and protect you no matter what. They love me in their own way, it's just they – they're the kind of people – they don't have the ability expand, and to accept new, and to new embrace new things, or new cultures, or new ideas. They're very set in

their ways and it's very stressful to feel so on edge at home, and then come to space where you have a lot of other things happening.

Sally also described the unsupportiveness and judgement of her family as an extremely stressful situation. Sally felt a substantial amount of pressure from her family to be a pharmacy major, but she was very unhappy with this idea. However, she pursued pharmacy directly after graduating from high school to please her family. She chose to attend a college further away from her family that was more affordable. Her decision to move upset her family and caused them to be very unsupportive of her choices. The negative judgment voiced by her family became stronger when she informed them of her choice to change her major. Sally was very unhappy in her courses and changed her major to exercise science. Even though she was much happier in this field of study, her family was very unsupportive and pessimistic about her decision. This was very upsetting to Sally because she was so close to her family. They were her main support system.

Sally also struggled with anxiety and depression. She sought out counseling because her depression became too much for her to handle. Unfortunately, her family did not support this decision either, due to the stigma associated with mental health disorders. She expressed struggling with her academics, depression, and her self-worth because she felt that she was doing everything wrong and could not please her family. She felt that over the years, she has not been able approach her family with these issues due to the judgment they place on her.

Lynn described her current family situation as the most extremely stressful situation she has experienced. At the time of the interview, Lynn's parents were undergoing a divorce and this situation negatively impacted her. She was very close to her family members and was shocked by the decision for her parents to divorce. This situation has caused her home-life to be very confusing and hectic. She stated, "I just feel like my whole family is broken." Additionally, she feels a significant amount of pressure to care for her brothers and be their support system.

Maria described her unplanned pregnancy as an extremely stressful situation she experienced during college. Maria became pregnant with her son when she was in her junior year of college. She expressed being scared at first, but she did not let it deter her from continuing college. She struggled understanding how to manage her time and all the new factors that would occur with her child. College, family, and successfully adjusting to this new lifestyle was very stressful for her. She had to develop better time management skills, which was difficult for her.

She also experienced stress when trying to find childcare when she returned to school. She explained finding a babysitter that worked with her schedule was very difficult.

Ashley was a single mother who expressed experiencing great difficultly addressing her son's ADHD diagnosis combined with attending college while raising two young boys. Ashley's younger son was struggling with his academics and had great difficulty focusing on his homework assignments. She tried to help with his assignments and attempted to motivate him to focus on his academics; they would spend hours working on his homework assignments. She felt very worn out because she also had to motivate herself in her academics. After he was diagnosed, they also struggled finding a medication that worked for him, which resulted in a significant amount of trial and error. She explained this situation "was frying me out really badly because I was literally in freak-out mode." She said "There's no words for it" when referring to the magnitude of stress she felt during this experience.

Relationships. Relationships were another factor that caused many stressful situations for the participants. These relationships were intimate as well as friendships. For example, Jen expressed experiencing issues with a current friend who was continuously being disrespectful and using her. This friend would repeatedly ask Jen for favors and money but did not provide any gratitude or repayment. Jen also described how stressful her previous relationship was, as her previous boyfriend was an alcoholic who suffered from extreme depression issues. This situation put a great deal of stress on Jen because she felt responsible for many of his actions. Additionally, her boyfriend accused her of giving him a sexually transmitted disease. This situation then gave her extreme anxiety and she got tested to ensure she did not have an STD. These relationships have caused Jen to question herself and avoid talking about how she feels because she continually thinks she is overreacting or acting crazy. Jen's previous boyfriend was an alcoholic who experienced severe depression. She expressed that it was difficult to be with him because she always blamed herself when he would become upset.

Cody described his breakup with his girlfriend as the most stressful experience he has suffered. His girlfriend broke up with him and began dating his best friend. He was under a lot of stress because he was unhappy at his community college and felt very alone in the environment, which caused him to rely on his friends and girlfriend. He expressed having a very difficult time overcoming the sadness and fear he felt when he lost his girlfriend.

So, that really messed me up because I felt like I – I already had that preexisting fear of being alone and of not having any connections. So, I lost my girlfriend and my best friend in one sweep and that hurt like crazy. It drove me into one of the most unhealthy times of my life. I was not sleeping. I was just in a dark headspace all the time. I failed two classes because I just COULD NOT keep my focus.

Bob also expressed negative issues associated with relationships. He stated that he had issues with dating and being sexually active within relationships due to a prior sexual assault that occurred during his freshman year. This situation is something that he is still struggling with and trying to overcome.

it's wrong and it feels wrong. And at the time that you're telling yourself, 'Oh, everything's fine. You're going to be okay.' You don't stop to really contemplate what it was that happened, and I think that's something that everyone deals that are in situations like that, and why it takes them so long to come to terms with it. It takes them so long to finally sit down and think to themselves, 'This happened.' I pushed it out of my head for a considerable amount of time before it hit me. It finally clicked in my head that something happened to me that was wrong and it felt like something was taken from me, that I was violated, and your body just – the minute you realize things happened, your body just spazzes out because it's just like – you feel like you're under attack. You feel like you've been hurt. And it's not like – the pain might not be there anymore, but at the same time, it's like being hit with a bullet and not realizing you were shot until after the adrenaline kicks off.

Dave also experienced significant stress with his relationships, specifically one of his friendships. One of his close friends was sexually assaulted and it was difficult for him to see someone he loved go through such a stressful situation. He felt personally responsible to watch out for his friends and worked very hard to make sure his friend "felt safe again. It may not be the same for other people, but I feel like I have a strong friendship with all of my friends, so I try to make sure that they're in a good place before I even worry about myself."

Another aspect of relationships that was stressful for some of the students was peer pressure. Cody did not drink or experiment with drugs. He expressed concern with these substances because he had witnessed the negative impacts of addiction within his family. Cody stated that addiction has been present in both sides of his family. He expressed feeling very

stressed when peers would pressure him or mock him for not trying alcohol and drugs. He explained he has no interest in trying these substances and dislikes that he gets made fun of for not participating.

Jen also tried to avoid using drugs and alcohol, but many of her friends used these substances on a regular basis. She stated that the pressure she felt often made her feel so stressed that she would avoid hanging out with some of her peers. Maria expressed that going out often caused her to feel more stressed because she felt added responsibility to take care of her peers. Fortunately, the students do seem to have had access to a set of positive coping strategies, as per Theme 3, below.

Theme 3: Positive Coping Strategies

Three main coping strategies that the participants described as helpful were spirituality, emotional sharing, and use of supports. Strategies that fit under spirituality include meditation and religion. Ashley explained that religion was a very positive coping strategy for her, including praying and spending time in reading religious texts such as the Bible. Dave expressed that meditation was extremely helpful:

> I would actually go into my room and lock the door. I would play the guided meditations on YouTube. Then I would also put on a facemask and I would lie there until that facemask was done, doing guided meditation. Then I would wake up like a new person. It was just so crazy how those types of things can actually reset you as a person and reset the stress levels in your life.

Meditation and religion as a coping strategy allowed the participants to reconnect with themselves and focus on their values and goals.

Emotional sharing was another helpful coping mechanism. Maria stated that when she felt stressed and was unable to distract herself from the stress that "a good cry" would make her feel better. Whether she cried with her fiancée, mother, or father, she explained allowing herself to be upset helped her cope with the situation. Bob explained that letting himself feel his emotions and "throw a pity party" which he felt was the best way to address his stress. Bob explained:

> I say, 'You can be as upset as you want to be. Nothing is invalid. Nothing is wrong. If you want to sit for 30 minutes and cry.' And I have to, I just bawl. I can just be as upset and let my body just get it all out. Like I just experience all those feelings at one time. I

just say, 'You have the rest of the night. Throw yourself a pity party.' And it's very good to set that with yourself. 'You have tonight, but after that, you're done. You're done feeling sorry for yourself. You're done letting it bother you. You move on after this point.' And it's something that I've always felt was the best way to handle it. There are times when I'll give myself that feeling, and then the next day, I feel better because I let myself kind of breathe.

Many participants also expressed that emotional sharing with friends was helpful and allowed them to feel supported and less stressed. Lynn felt that talking to her friends was her main coping strategy utilized to help her adjust to her parents' divorce. She explained she heavily relies on their support to "get my mind off life". Cody also said that talking to others and making new friends helped him during his experience of significant stress. Jen explained that emotional sharing allowed her to "vent" to her friends, mother, or boyfriend allow her to relieve stress, especially when she is angry. This coping strategy increased the participants' sense of support and allowed them to feel less stressed about the situation. Dave explained that emotional sharing to his friends, supervisors, and faculty members helped him transition through stressful situations:

> If you're stressing out in a class, maybe talking to your professor about it, that might help. I go to my professor's office hours a lot when I'm stressed out, just to clear my head on what's going on in the class.

> I really am a talker. I like to talk out my problems, especially with my close friends. Like I said, I have strong friendships with them. They can come to me at any time and I can also come to them at any time and have any problem in the world and we'll sit down and we'll figure it out.

The third positive coping mechanism was use of support systems. Perceived support has been known to have a significant impact on individuals during transitions (Schlossberg, 2011). The findings demonstrate the importance and significance of the support the participants received from family, friends, significant others, and faculty members. The perceived support made the participants feel less stressed and allowed them to manage their emotions in a more productive way. Friends were perceived as the most consistent form of support. Jen, Sally, Bob, and Lynn relied very heavily on their friends for support during their extremely stressful situations.

Lynn explained that her friends were her main source of support during her parents' divorce. She also stated that she was very likely to look to others for support in any stressful situation. Since Sally and Bob have experienced a lot of stress and conflict with their family, they, too, relied on the support of their friends. Lynn shared:

> I would say friends are my biggest thing right now to get me through this and to help me call on other families. Like, that's another thing. I mean, like families of my parents, like they help too with life. They really have reached out to me multiple times. You know, just to be able to vent to someone that's a parent or maybe one of my mom's friends that is divorced. She has been divorced for a long time. Like, she just gives me advice on life and like just advice on how to do things differently because life is totally different now without having . . . or WITH having parents that are separated.

Dave became very close with his instructors, staff members and his employer. He communicated with them about academic and personal issues and felt that their support really motivated him. Sally also looked to her faculty members for support when she chose to switch her major.

> I went to my professor in his office hours and I was like 'I just wanna talk this out with you. Can I tell you what I'm thinking about the exam and then you tell me if I'm right?' I did and then I left feeling confident. I took it and it went very well. I think that, definitely, when I feel like I can't do it on my own that's when I turn to other people. What really helped me in terms of switching my major and what kind of made me feel more confident about it, was honestly my professors.

As we have seen, students did often use a set of positive coping strategies, including a variety of forms of spirituality, openly talking about their problems with others, and using personal and academic support systems. Unfortunately, they also often resorted to less helpful coping strategies.

Theme 4: Unhelpful Coping Strategies

Several of the participants described coping strategies that they said did not help improve their stress or extremely stressful situations. One of the most common unhelpful coping strategies was avoiding problems. The participants stated they often ignored their emotions and avoided addressing conflict with family, friends or significant others for fear of making the situation/stress worse. For example, Dave stated he would try to "push it out of his mind" but

explained that did not help him accomplish tasks or feel better about any situation. He actually stated ignoring his tasks tended to actually cause him more stress. Jen expressed similar feelings, explaining if she did not address the issues she felt it would "bother the crap out of her." Bob shared:

> I think the thing that made it so stressful was the not acknowledging. Putting it away in a locked box and saying, 'That didn't happen.' And I still can't – sometimes I still can't wrap my mind around it and sometimes I don't like the terminology of it. I hate to say the word rape. It feels more real than I want it to be.

Another coping strategy that was considered unhelpful was being alone. Being alone was connected to undesirable consequences like negative thoughts, overthinking, and extreme sadness. Sally stated she tried to deal with her issues on her own because she "didn't want to burden my family." However, she recognized this coping strategy did not positively impact herself or the situation. Additionally, Jen explained isolating herself made her feel sad and she would be unmotivated to do anything.

Disordered eating, such as overeating or restricting food intake, was also found to be an unhelpful coping strategy that some participants said they exhibited during extremely stressful situations. Cody stated that he consumed an entire tub of cookie dough in one sitting to attempt to reduce his stress. Bob explained that he would often not eat for days during periods of high stress. He labeled himself a "stress not eater," explaining he would vomit if he ate while he was upset.

> So, my method – I'm a stress not eater. There are people out there that are like – whenever they get stressed, they just cram everything in their mouth at one time. I am so totally opposite. Whenever I get stressed or get to that point of, 'I can't handle everything.' The first thing that shuts off is my stomach and it's been like that for a long time, ever since I was a little kid. . . . If I try and eat when I'm upset, I'll throw up.

Participants also discussed using substances to cope with their stress. Lynn stated that she will often get drinks with her friends when she is stressed. Sally explained that she smoked marijuana when she felt overwhelmed and sad:

> And I did start doing drugs. Not your medication drugs, I started smoking, and just trying to forget about it. Just to slowly get myself to a point where I can be like, 'You know what, I don't want to be here anymore.' So, I was going – as they say, light one up. But

like, I did. I smoked, I ate edibles, I did all that stuff. I don't know if you want to share that with people. It's confidential. But I did.

These coping strategies were recognized by the participants as being unhelpful because they did not generally alleviate the original stress, and the further negative consequences of the strategy frequently caused even more stress for the participants.

Discussion

One of the most significant findings in this study is that these participants, who were not selected for stress or recruited for the study based on experiences of stress, experienced significant stress on top of the general stress caused by the transition to college. The sample was not random, so we do not know how representative participants' experiences are, but the findings clearly demonstrate how stressful college life is for at least some students. The stressful situations experienced by the participants caused them to change their roles and process their new stressors with coexisting stress (Schlossberg, 1995).

While the situations were different and caused various types of stress and reactions, some commonalities were recognized among the participants. All participants experienced stress as overwhelming, connecting general and extreme stress to negative emotions and feelings. Additionally, multiple sources of stress were seen throughout the participants' experiences. The most reported types of stress were academics, financial issues, and relationships and family issues, which were seen to have a strong effect on the participants.

Consistent with Schlossberg (1995) and other prior research, the perceived support the participants received was recognized as exceptionally beneficial during each participants' transaction. Many of these participants turned to friends, peers made through organizations, mentors, and faculty members throughout their stressful transitions (Schlossberg, 2011; DeVilbiss, 2014). Additionally, participants who experienced conflict with their support systems felt stress regarding this issue, as lack of perceived support was connected to their feelings of stress.

As discussed in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping, situations are highly individualized, and each participant had different reactions to the stress felt during stressful situations. Students encounter new situations frequently during their college experience and these situations can cause stress and confusion for the students. Although not all students encounter extreme problems, the stress average undergraduate students feel should not

go unnoticed. While not all stressful situations lead to students requiring intense treatment or medication, students recognizing and acknowledging their issues is fundamental to their well-being both now and later in life.

Consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) psychological definition of coping, the participants in this study developed strategies to cope with the high levels of stress they experienced, to alleviate the stress. The coping strategies utilized were recognized by the participants as either helpful or not helpful in alleviating their stress. Coping strategies participants recognized as helpful were connected to spirituality, emotional sharing, and use of supports. Unhelpful coping strategies were recognized as avoiding problems, being alone, and forms of disorder eating and substance use. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined two distinct functions of coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Each form of coping can have negative and positive outcomes, dependent on the individual and the situation. Problem-focused coping strategies have been reported to be more likely have positive outcomes, as these strategies attempt to manage the external stress (Mason, 2017; Saras, Koortzen, & Oosthuizen, 2009). However, emotion-focused coping can also deliver positive outcomes by alleviating stress in a more internally focused manner (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mason, 2017; Saras et al., 2009). Examples of both coping types can be seen in the participants' strategies. Spirituality, emotional sharing, avoiding problems, and being alone could be viewed as emotion-focused coping. While use of supports, emotional sharing, and disorder eating and substance use can be connected to problem-focused coping (Mason, 2017).

As indicated earlier, Schlossberg's theory posits that four factors are particularly relevant to how individuals deal with and perceive stress. They are self, situation, support, and strategies. Our data is not enough to allow for conclusions about self and situation, but one can connect Schlossberg's (2011) support and strategies to the study themes. In terms of strategies, the helpful coping strategies used attempted to either modify the source of strain, cognitively neutralize the threat, or aid in managing the developed stress (DeVilbiss, 2014). Whether the participant was seeking help from others or developing their own problem-solving techniques, these strategies were utilized to alleviate the negative emotions brought on by the stressful situations. On the other hand, the unhelpful coping strategies (avoidance of problems, being alone, and disordered eating and substance use) all have the potential to develop into more severe problems.

In terms of supports, the students described several supports that they used, and consistent with Schlossberg's theory the supports had an important impact. The findings also point to the need for the higher education institution to facilitate support. As for all health-related issues, both physical and mental, early detection and intervention proves for a better outcome as problems tend to exacerbate over time (Eisenberg, Nicklett, Roeder, & Kirz, 2011). Regardless of the situation, many students will need assistance at some point. Providing students with effective methods to develop strategies to cope with the transition to college could help provide a better foundation for positive psychological development. Additionally, this could limit the opportunity of students developing potentially harmful coping strategies. The number of students suffering from mental health issues is continuing to increase (ACHA, 2016). Students need to have support on campus and need to develop healthier ways of coping with their stress as demonstrated within this study.

Implications

The findings of this study indicated that higher education institutions should provide students with additional wellness programming. These programs should be both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, encouraging students to connect to their feelings and other students, while developing effective ways to address the problems being faced. Some examples of support programs are de-stress fests, wellness weeks, and health strategies weeks. These programs should provide students with positive information about how to deal with stress and allow them to participate in relaxing activities. Additionally, these would provide the opportunity for students to acknowledge their stress, which has been recognized as a significant initiative in coping with challenges (Mason, 2017). Stress, in some form, was associated with the college experience for all participants. It would be beneficial for students to learn about the effect of stress and how to successfully manage all the new situations being faced (Messer, Horan, Turner, & Weber, 2016).

Providing students with the tools to develop fundamental coping strategies can benefit them throughout their lifetime. These types of programs could also increase the opportunity for access to support, which is recognized as a significant part of a student's transition (DeVilbiss, 2014). Meditation and mindfulness such as yoga could be activities for students to participate in. to help alleviate the feelings of stress. Mindfulness has been connected to decreased stress and anxiety in college students (Messer et al., 2016), and meditation and mindfulness were

recognized as helpful coping strategies by participants in this study. This may be a strategy that other college students are familiar with and would be willing to learn more about. Additionally, teaching mindfulness online can be effective in reducing stress and improving coping strategies (Messer et al., 2016). This offers universities online opportunities to assist students who cannot or do not wish to participate in on-campus programming. Other activities associated with mindfulness and meditation could include relaxation activities such as creating stress balls, utilizing essential oils, coloring, and many others. The activities should be facilitated by staff members from multiple campus departments in collaboration with student leaders. This would allow students to reconnect with themselves and develop a deeper understanding of their emotions. Emotion-focused coping has also been shown to significantly reduce individual stress levels (Baqutayan & Mai, 2012). Students beginning college have reported increased psychological tension but students participating in emotion-focused coping, such as meditation, have reported lower stress levels (Baqutayan & Mai, 2012). Offering and promoting these types of programs could provide positive assistance and inform students about coping strategies, potentially decreasing their stress and mental health issues. A goal of these programs would also be to offer students a new way to think about stress.

The transition to college is stressful and this will likely remain. However, educating students about their stress and effectively coping with new situations could allow them to perceive stress as a motivation and persist through their issues (Mason, 2017; Messer et al., 2016). Considering the future when coping with a stressful situation can lead students to understand that valuable lessons can be learned from stressful situations (Mason, 2017). If students gain the knowledge and confidence to successful cope through their college transition, this could positively influence future coping strategies.

Future research would be beneficial to discover what specific programs provide students with the most effective assistance. Additionally, future research could expand upon the coping strategies identified in this study to further examine how students alleviate their stress. Supporting students in their college experiencing by providing healthy ways to lessen and cope with stress can provide a more productive and motivating environment.

Conclusion

College is an environment that provides students with possibilities to challenge themselves and grow, and that encourages students to discover their adult identity and develop

their career path. However, extreme stress and confusion can interfere with these possibilities. Colleges can do a better job of connecting overly stressed students to resources that allow them to learn from and cope with their transition in helpful ways, leading them to be more successful during their college experience (Mason, 2017; Messer et al., 2016).

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