

PERCEIVED LEVEL OF STRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN EDMONTON, CANADA¹

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Summary.—A sample of 457 (177 men, 280 women) undergraduate students were surveyed regarding perceived level of stress. Women were more likely than men to report an unacceptable stress level. To reduce stress, women were more likely to indicate a need to limit commitments, exercise, and worry less. Reasons for not reducing stress were lack of time and lack of self-discipline, both of which were reported significantly more often by women. The present data suggest health education interventions are needed to assist students in coping with the stress they experience.

Although reduction of stress is a goal for many persons, stress can either hinder or motivate performance. The direction of its effect depends on the perception of the individual. When stress is perceived negatively or becomes excessive, it may become linked to physical and mental illness. The process of university education evaluates the student constantly and causes reevaluation of the self-image. As the term progresses stress rises with every paper and examination. Stress can affect both health and academic performance. Among other health risks, it may result in increased blood pressure, a stress-related condition leading to an elevated risk of disease (Lesko & Summerfield, 1989).

To avoid damage from stress, people learn to deal with the pressures they experience. Blake and Vandiver (1988) reported that university students often attempt to control their stress through avoidance, which can produce adverse effects on emotional and physical health. Other methods to reduce stress may include religion, social support, or positive reappraisal (Mattlin, Whethington, & Kessler, 1990).

The present study was designed to collect baseline data for the evaluation of health education strategies for assisting students in achieving and maintaining a reasonable level of stress.

METHOD

Undergraduate students (177 men, 280 women) were surveyed as part of

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the research participation component of two introductory psychology classes. The majority of students (90%) were in their first year of studies. Students were classified as *young* if under 22 years (138 men, 220 women; *Mdn* age = 19 yr.) and *mature* if 22 years or older (39 men, 60 women; *Mdn* age = 32 yr.). Participation was both voluntary and anonymous. Students completed a questionnaire designed to assess how they perceived their stress level and if too high, how they felt they could reduce their level of stress.²

RESULTS

In Table 1 are percentages of undergraduate men and women who indicated that they could reduce their experienced stress and what factors prevented them from doing so. Seventy-one percent of the respondents felt their lives were either very stressful (8.0%) or stressful (63.2%). Women were significantly [$\chi^2(N = 457) = 8.26, p < 0.05$] more likely to report their lives as stressful. Older men reported having less stressful lives than younger men,

TABLE 1
PERCENT OF STUDENTS INDICATING HOW THEY FELT THEY COULD REDUCE THEIR
STRESS LEVELS AND FACTORS PREVENTING THE BEHAVIOR

Item	Men		Women	
	Young <i>n</i> = 138	Mature <i>n</i> = 39	Young <i>n</i> = 220	Mature <i>n</i> = 60
Needed Change				
Nothing, stress level acceptable	31.2	15.4*	10.5	6.7‡
Exercise more	23.2	30.8	42.3	48.3‡
Learn to relax, worry less	48.6	53.8	70.9	75.0‡
Socialize more, make new friends	16.7	15.4	19.1	15.0
Change present situation	6.5	7.7	8.2	10.0
Reduce drug/medication use	3.6	7.7	0.9	5.0*
More time with family/friends	11.6	10.3	12.3	13.3
Learn to limit commitments	16.7	17.9	26.4	36.7‡
Perceived Block				
Lack time	10.9	10.3	22.3	20.0‡
Lack self-discipline	6.5	23.1†	21.4	18.3‡
Too depressed	0.7	2.6	2.7	5.0
Don't know how to start	4.3	5.1	5.5	8.3
Peer pressure	1.4	0.0	0.5	0.0
Lack of support (family/friends)	0.7	0.0	2.7	5.0
Do not want to change	2.9	0.0	1.4	0.0
Too difficult	5.1	7.7	6.8	6.7

*Age (<22 yr. vs ≥22 yr.) difference ($p < 0.05$); †Age difference ($p < 0.01$); ‡Sex difference ($p < 0.01$).

²The questionnaire is in Document NAPS-04970. Remit \$4.00 for fiche or \$9.25 for photocopy to National Auxiliary Publications Service, c/o Microfiche Publications, POB 3513, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

yet mature women reported having the highest stress. Only 16.6% of all respondents reported having an acceptable level of stress in their lives with women being much *less* likely to report an acceptable level of stress [$\chi^2_1(N = 457) = 25.46, p < 0.001$].

Women, more than men, reported they needed to reduce stress. Respondents gave reasons for not reducing their stress levels. Women were more likely to report lack of time [$\chi^2_1(N = 457) = 9.17, p < 0.01$] and lack of self-discipline [$\chi^2_1(N = 457) = 8.70, p < 0.01$]. Lack of self-discipline was reported significantly more by the older men than the young men [$\chi^2_1(N = 177) = 9.12, p < 0.01$]. No other age or sex differences in reducing stress were statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

Results of the study indicate that, for the most part, these university students felt they experienced too much stress. Mature women were especially likely to report high stress, although both young and more mature women perceived more stress than their male peers. Although the students were able to identify strategies for reducing their stress, they were not acting on this knowledge. This indicates a need to work with such students to enable them to act on their knowledge and intentions.

A study of health information needs of university students, conducted by Svenson and Campbell (1992), showed that the principal topic on which information was desired was mental health. Stress reduction is an important aspect of mental health. Students believe they know how to reduce stress to reasonable levels, yet many find themselves blocked in doing so. Successful health education initiatives should focus on the blocks perceived by students and should be sensitive to sex and age differences in what obstacles students experience.

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