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Abstract: Determines the major sources of stress among college students. Examination of interpersonal, intrapersonal, academic and environmental sources of stress; Top five sources include change in sleeping habits, vacations/breaks and increased work load; Implications of findings in creating stress management programs.

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SOURCES OF STRESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

The Student Stress Survey (SSS) was used to determine the major sources of stress among college students. The scale consisted of 40 potentially stressful situations. The scale addressed interpersonal, intrapersonal, academic, and environmental sources of stress. The items in the scale were also classified as either daily hassles or major life events. Participants were 100 students at a mid-sized, Midwestern university and varied in year in school, age, gender, and major. Overall, daily hassles were reported more often than major life events, with intrapersonal sources of stress being the most frequently reported source. The top five sources of stress were; change in sleeping habits, vacations/breaks, change in eating habits, increased work load, and new responsibilities. The findings from this study may be further used to examine which sources of stress cause the highest levels of stress among college students, and may be helpful in creating stress management programs.

College students, especially freshmen, are a group particularly prone to stress (D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991) due to the transitional nature of college life (Towbes & Cohen, 1996). They must adjust to being away from home for the first time, maintain a high level of academic achievement, and adjust to a new social environment. College students, regardless of year in school, often deal with pressures related to finding a job or a potential life partner. These stressors do not cause anxiety or tension by themselves. Instead, stress results from the interaction between stressors and the individual's perception and reaction to those stressors (Romano, 1992). The amount of stress experienced may be influenced by the individual's ability to effectively cope with stressful events and situations (D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991). If stress is not dealt with effectively, feelings of loneliness and nervousness, as well as sleeplessness and excessive worrying may result (Wright, 1967). It is important that stress intervention programs be designed to address stress of college students. However, in order to design an effective intervention, the stressors specific to college students must be determined (Wright, 1967).

The dynamic relationship between the person and environment in stress perception and

reaction is especially magnified in college students. The problems and situations encountered by college students may differ from those faced by their non-student peers (Hirsch & Ellis, 1996). The environment in which college students live is quite different. While jobs outside of the university setting involve their own sources of stress, such as evaluation by superiors and striving for goals, the continuous evaluation that college students are subjected to, such as weekly tests and papers, is one which is not often seen by non-students (Wright, 1964). The pressure to earn good grades and to earn a degree is very high (Hirsch & Ellis, 1996). Earning high grades is not the only source of stress for college students. Other potential sources of stress include excessive homework, unclear assignments, and uncomfortable classrooms (Kohn & Frazer, 1986). In addition to academic requirements, relations with faculty members and time pressures may also be sources of stress (Sgan-Cohen & Lowental, 1988). Relationships with family and friends, eating and sleeping habits, and loneliness may affect some students adversely (Wright, 1967).

Assessment of stress levels in college students is a topic often examined by researchers. For example, Towbes and Cohen (1996) created the College Chronic Life Stress Survey in which they focused on the frequency of chronic stress in the lives of college students. This scale contains items that persist across time to create stress, such as interpersonal conflicts, self-esteem problems, and money problems. They evaluated these stressors in relation to how many times a student had to deal with them on a weekly basis. They found that in regard to chronic stress, first-year students scored higher than other students. Similar studies have examined sources of stress among both undergraduate (Gadzella, 1994) and graduate students (Rocha-Singh, 1994). While many specific events and situations have been implicated as stressors for college students, more research is needed to investigate the nature of these stressors for college students, and which stressors are most prevalent in college students lives. It is unclear whether most stressors result from interpersonal relationships or academics. In addition, research is needed to clarify whether these stressors are mostly daily hassles or major life events. The purpose of this study was to determine what sources of stress are the most prevalent among college students, and to examine the nature of these stressors.

Method

Participants

Participants were 100 undergraduate students (20 males, 80 females) at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Students were recruited from a local chapter of a national co-ed service fraternity that is open to students at any grade level.

Materials and Procedure

The Student Stress Survey was created for this study based on the Student Stress Scale (Insel, & Roth, 1985), the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale (Taylor, 1953), and other potential sources of stress that were identified by the researchers. The survey consisted of 40 items that were divided into 4 categories of potential sources of stress: six items representing interpersonal sources of stress, 16 items representing intrapersonal sources of stress, eight items representing academic sources of stress, and 10 items representing environmental sources of stress. Interpersonal sources result from interactions with other people, such as, a fight with a boyfriend or girlfriend or trouble with parents. Intrapersonal sources result from internal sources, such as, changes in eating or sleeping habits. Academic sources arise from school-related activities and issues, such as, an increased class workload or transferring schools. Finally, environmental stressors result from problems in the environment, outside of academics, such as car or computer problems. Respondents checked each item they had experienced during the current school

year.

Within these divisions, the stressors were identified as either daily hassles, like financial difficulties or being placed in an unfamiliar situation, or major life events, such as starting college or change in use of alcohol or drugs. Daily hassles comprised six interpersonal stressors, seven intrapersonal stressors, three academic stressors, and seven environmental. The Student Stress Survey was distributed at the beginning of a regularly scheduled fraternity meeting in the 1997 Spring semester.

Results and Discussion

The number of items checked ranged from 0 to 31, with a mean of 16.5 (SD = 4.62). The distribution of responses was as follows: 38% of the stressors were intrapersonal, 28% environmental, 19% interpersonal, and 15% academic. The number of responses to each item can be found in Table 1. Of the responses for interpersonal sources of stress, 100% were daily hassles. Daily hassles accounted for 88.2% of the environmental stressors. Daily hassles were responsible for 77.3% of the intrapersonal stressors, and 67.2% of the academic sources of stress. Overall, 81.1% of the identified stress sources could be classified as daily hassles.

In our sample, intrapersonal sources of stress were the most common source of stress. Interestingly, three of the top five sources of stress listed by the participants were intrapersonal sources. The five most frequently stressors were, in order: change in sleeping habits (89%), vacations/breaks (82%), change in eating habits (74%), new responsibilities (73%), and increased class workload (73%). It is important to note that this data was collected in the Spring Semester, a time in which many people were planning spring break trips. This may have raised the number of responses for taking a break or vacation. Financial difficulties (71%) and change in social activities (71%) were also frequently reported stressors. The five least frequently reported stressors were; death of a friend (6%), severe injury (5%), transferred schools (3%), engagement/marriage (2%), and divorce between parents (1%). Quitting one's job (8%) was also a infrequently reported stressor. Another interesting result was that, in a college setting, events such as missing too many classes (21%) and arguing with an instructor (11%) only comprised 15% of the total responses.

This study represents a first step in understanding sources of stress for college students. We were able to identify which sources of stress occur in the lives of these students. Additionally, research should expand on these findings by determining the degree of stress resulting from each source. Such research would permit conclusions on which stressors are most detrimental or severe and which stressors have a negligible effect. This information could be useful in designing a stress intervention by suggesting the focus and content of the workshop. For example, new responsibilities, waiting in long line, and holding a job, were commonly reported sources of stress. If the most potent sources of stress are related to the varying demands on a student's time, then time management training would be a necessary component of a successful workshop. Conflict management training might also be another valuable area to cover in a stress management workshop, given the high level of reported roommate conflict. Another frequently reported source of stress for college students was receiving a lower grade than expected. Perhaps teaching students ways to deal with unexpected stressors would be another valuable component of a stress management workshop. The high number of reported computer problems is a relatively new area of stress research for a college population, and should be researched further.

Another important factor to consider when studying stress is to explore which sources of stress are motivating and beneficial, and which sources of stress are detrimental. It has been established that moderate amounts of stress help motivate us and, at times, increase our performance (Moore, Burrows, & Dalziel, 1992). The outcome of stress may

be dependent upon its source and its severity. This possibility should be investigated in future research. Given that our sample was drawn from a single campus organization, future research should verify our findings with a more diverse sample.

In conclusion, our results are suggestive as to the necessary components of a stress management program specific to the needs of college students. Given the detrimental effects of stress on health (Zakowski, Hall, & Baum, 1992) and academic performance (Wright, 1964), college administrators should consider incorporating stress management training in orientation activities. At a minimum, the sources of stress identified as the most common could be discussed with incoming freshmen. Furthermore, students should be informed of the campus resources available to help them address these resources. A better approach may be the use of a stress management workshop, specifically geared to the stressors encountered by college students. Certainly, stress in the college setting cannot be eliminated but we can and should do a better job preparing our students to manage it.

Table 1
Number of College Students Reporting Each Source of Stress

Category	Total
Interpersonal	
Change in social activities	71
Roommate conflict	61
Work with people you don't know	57
Fight with boyfriend/girlfriend	41
New boyfriend/girlfriend	36
Trouble with parents	21
Intrapersonal	
Change in sleeping habits	89
Change in eating habits	74
New responsibilities	73
Financial difficulties	71
Held a job	65
Spoke in public	60
Change in use of alcohol or drugs	39
Outstanding personal achievement	35
Started college	32
Decline in personal health	26
Minor law violation	14
Change in religious beliefs	13
Death of a family member	12
Death of a friend	6
Severe injury	5
Engagement/Marriage	2
Academic	
Increased class workload	73
Lower grade than anticipated	68
Change of Major	24
Search for graduate school/job	21
Missed too many classes	21
Anticipation of graduation	20
Serious argument with instructor	11
Transferred schools	3
Environmental	

Vacations/breaks	82
Waited in long line	69
Computer problems	69
Placed in unfamiliar situation	51
Messy living conditions	50
Put on hold for extended period of time	47
Change in living environment	46
Car trouble	42
Quit job	8
Divorce between parents	1

Note. [a]n = 100

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