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School Induced Stress in College Students in the United States

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Abstract

The purpose of this literary review is to explore how psychological and acute stress affect the academic abilities of college students. We will explore the effects of stress and how they directly impair the academic, social, emotional, and mental well-being of college students in the United States. This can be seen as you observe and study what stress looks like on a college student. It is found that over 1/3 of most universities have students that struggle with intense stress. Often, students do not know or understand how to cope. This lack of knowledge can stem from their childhood, where they experienced intense stressful events without ever having any conclusion or healing. The lack of direction by adults or counselors leads to avoidance coping and this is the mechanism with which they handle the rigors of college academia. Although these scenarios and stress in the public eye have been viewed as negative, recent studies have shown that individuals have more power over stress than stress does over them. Stress is adaptive, and college students can reverse the negative effects in their lives by intentionally reaching out to others and getting help. The Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), is a clinical method of helping manage stress, which confirms the mechanisms of reaching out to others.

While there is not a standardized method to gather data about levels of stress, this limitation does not stop researchers from noticing the impact that academic programs are finding. As well, we will see how certain mechanisms can assist students in turning stress into a manageable and positive thing in their lives, and this can help students to find stress as a positive thing that can propel college students forward to be capable of achieving their pursuits in a successful way.

*Key Words:* psychological stress, acute stress, college students, coping, positive stress
Impairing Stress on College Students in the United States

Psychological stress has been defined as environmental demands that are perceived to exceed the individual’s capacity to adapt (Cohen et al., 2007). This stress can have serious negative effects on one’s life: “Chronic, early-life exposure to stressors, such as adverse childhood experiences, modify neuroplasticity influencing short and long-term resiliency, ability to maintain allostasis, and eventually can result in disease if allostasis is not effectively managed” (McEwen, 2016). Thus, without learning how to alleviate or maintain stress, the average person can break down from within. While not all cases of stress lead to such paralyzing, intense states, many cases of stress and anxiety do end in stunting individuals with their physical, mental, academic, and social endeavors.

There are several studies that have been done that explore the importance of understanding, defining, and declaring the importance of psychological and normal stress in college age students. In 2017, the American College Health Association conducted a national survey that drew results from 63,497 college students about factors that affected their academic performance. The most reported factor was stress (30%) and 48% of the students who participated in the survey reported that their stress level was ‘more than average’ or ‘tremendous’” (American College Health Association, 2017). These results are alarmingly high, especially when it is considered that college students make approximately 15% of the United States population. This study did not account for the factors that affect the general population when they are needing to perform something of high rigor, like college academics. The conclusion of this study is that there is a prevalent problem among college age students who are being affected by stress as well as adults who have finished, dropped out, or sought different means of learning in the United States (Melanie Hansen, 2023). Although acute stress has been
hard to measure, there are specific symptoms to understand. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) diagnoses symptoms of stress as difficulty sleeping, irritability, poor concentration, hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, motor restlessness ((5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Even with these specific qualifications, the manifestation of stress is different in each individual. Therefore, there is not a specific treatment to cure stress for anyone. For this purpose, many have studied how stress can turn stress into a catalyst for positive outcomes.

We have found that through methods like identifying the root problem, using coping mechanisms, and validating external sources, stress can be turned into something positive. Specifically in American university students, we find their academic aspirations become more attainable and more meaningful (McGonigal, 2015). Understanding that stress cannot be measured perfectly, we acknowledge the discrepancies in any of the work that is presented in this literature review.

Throughout this review we will review why school induced stress in college age students in the United States is so relevant and important. Specifically, we will investigate what stress looks like for college students, the onset and challenges of stress. We will also discuss the limitations and implications for future research and clinical application. Understanding how lives are affected by stress and learning how to overcome it could be permitted for more long-term success for college students in the United States.

Methods

Data for this literature review was found and collected from the databases: PsycInfo EBSCO-APA Psycinfo -APA Thesaurus of Psychological Index- Google Scholar. Using the key words “stress” “school induced stress” “stress and coping measures” “college students” I conducted an
initial search of # articles. Then “stress” AND “school induced stress” AND “psychological stress” AND “United States college students”. I excluded # articles based on exclusion criteria and used # article based on inclusion criteria. narrows the specific search to 37 articles that met the inclusion criteria. 12 articles and one book will be used as resources. The oldest articles are from the early 2000’s. Some of these peer-reviewed articles are specific to a certain demographic or nationality which excludes them from this research literary review. The peer-reviewed articles to be included define stress, share about other causes of stress to further validate this literary review, similarly other disorders, and coping mechanisms. "positive stress" AND "college" AND "united states" "kelly mcgonigal". Another article from a PHd Kelly McGonigal will be used. 13 articles will

**Results**

**What “Stress on College Students” Looks Like**

The overall experience of each college student in the United States at school is relatively similar, with a few differences depending on their past experiences with school, and their cognitive abilities. The cognitive abilities of students that are attending college are diverse. This means that there are students who have achieved perfect grades, been involved with extracurriculars, and had little to no problems, while others have needed much guidance, assistance, and support with programs like individual education plans (IEP) and coping methods to minimize stress and mental health (Martínez, 2022). Having a background of any of these said factors could have a big influence on the average day of the student. Further, it could limit them in pursuits after college. In 2021, Sabella and Martínez described in a psychiatric rehabilitation journal about barriers to continuous school, other training, or work. These barriers included: stress-induced anxiety or panic and increased symptomatology. Both of these were related to the
mental health condition of the individual (Sabella, K. (2021). We are to provide students with an opportunity to use schooling to improve their lives through learning applicable academia, regulation, and life skills, then we know we can start with understanding mental health barriers. The research of Sabella and of Martínez (2021, 2022) showed us that adults from 18-26 years old are being hindered in their academic pursuits and that their quality of life is less than it could be. Their physical, mental, emotional, and social selves are impaired in a way that could be prevented with proper intervention and awareness (McGonigal, 2015). Through these studies, we see that there is a growing amount of research being done on the hindering effects of mental health on the young adults in colleges and there are solutions through intervention. Often, Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is something that can be done as a clinical intervention, before taking any sort of medicine. We can synthesize that young adults are in need of help, with the limitation of not knowing exactly how to help each individual with their exact needs.

Researchers in the American College Health Association explored the various factors that contribute to the impairment of college students (Kent, 2022). These factors include, but are not limited to, a new social environment, academic pressures, and financial concerns (Britt et al., 2017; Britt et al., 2016). Further, we find from a different study that the environment and stressors in college are very unique and can change a student’s development (Archarya, 2018). Because of this, accurately diagnosing the stress of students and the root of their struggles can be difficult. We can understand that the medical history and experiences of students affects their exposure to the correct language to interpret their feelings. At least 23% of students claimed on a survey about their feelings and exposure to stress at their university that they did not know if what they experienced was considered stress. This could imply a large limitation to this study because the number of students who claimed to have psychological stress induced by their school
experience could be 48% higher. The impairment of students that is discussed above shows us that there are significant academic setbacks that students are experiencing. We see that it can start when they are young, within their families or through pre-existing conditions. It continues to evolve and can affect daily life in a way that is paralyzing or debilitating. Interventions should be considered within a child’s early education and life experience, and should continue throughout adulthood and higher education.

**Onset and Challenges of Stress in College Students’ Lives**

Across many universities, about 58% of students are claiming to be going through psychological stress or stress-induced struggles in their lives and they normally do not have coping mechanisms to help themselves (American College Health Association, 2017). In this study, the truth is confirmed that this stress in college has a large impact on academic success and life-long health. A way to empower students to face these struggles is to validate their experiences and give them tools with which they can learn to cope. Martínez and Castillo (2022) shared that coping strategies and relationships with academic performance have a correlation between academic success and problem solving (Martínez & Castillo, 2022). Palacio contributed to this finding, and in addition concluded that most students who actively were using stress coping strategies showed lower levels of academic stress, while students who were avoiding stressful responsibilities or thoughts presented higher levels of stress (Palacio et al., 2012). Because of these studies and research, we can gather that positive active strategies are a functioning, and proven way to lower stress levels for college students.

Not all students experience intense, stressful experiences for the first time in the college setting. In order to reach each student, it is important to understand that the past of incoming students and current students varies drastically. It is understood that students could have endured
childhood adversity or stress. This could include, but not be limited to, physical, psychological, sexual abuse, neglect, and household disfunction (Coleman et al., 2016; Kalmakis et al., 2019). This truth is illustrated in another study where about 960 students, 32%, of the 3000 students followed experienced at least 2 adverse childhood experiences (Windle et al., 2018). These recent studies show that stress, psychological stress, are most likely impacting a very large portion of the United States college students.

Although there is not a definite solution to aid a bigger population, it has been found that there are methods through which college students in the United States can have help. As students are given a chance to recognize and attend to the acute and psychological stressors in their lives, their academic, social, mental, and emotional being can be improved. By educating students about coping mechanisms like appraisal-focused, problem-focused, emotion-focused coping they can better see in themselves how they will improve their balance in life in order to achieve higher success.

**College Students Control Over Stress**

While stress is something that psychologists are searching to treat, it does not have to be something that is seen as completely negative. In many of the studies that have been published, stress is viewed as a negative thing. This is because stress often causes paralyzing, painful, debilitating results, like the 31.6% of college students who claim to have low academic performance levels (American College Health Association, 2017). Most recently though, stress can be something positive. Kelly McGonigal reported that another one of the best stress coping mechanisms is to reach outside of ourselves (McGonigal, 2015). When individual students are willing to reach out to others, it creates a bond and a safe space wherewith they can be genuine
with themselves and it connects them to someone else who can help them better. This can also lead them to use problem-solving stress mechanisms as well.

**Discussion**

This literature review discussed the stress that is onset through the unique environment of college. It showed that there are immediate needs within United States universities to prepare students for the rigors of college life and adjusting so that their social, academic, physical, and mental needs can be better protected and responsive to stress. As well, this review analyzed the need to change the perspective of young adults so that they can change the negative physiological effects that stress can have on them.

There are more than 45% of students who last reported about these psychological effects that they have personally felt, and they were affected in multiple ways in their lives (American College Health Association, 2017).” While dealing with stress is something that can be learned and handled, the effect it is having on the academic success of students is something that is alarming. If those in educational programs today are to continue to improve society and the world, there must be programs set in place to help find those who are struggling. Importantly, the perspective and attitude towards stress must be shifted to a positive outlook (McGonigal, 2015).

As a result of these conclusions, college campuses should take an initiative to adequately counsel, support, and encourage success through mentoring programs, forums or classes about stress reduction, counseling, or something of this sort. These ideas are to allow students a safe environment in which they can overcome past challenges while still challenging themselves academically and finding good social groups through which to support themselves.

One of the biggest limitations to this topic is that there is not a standardized way to measure someone’s stress. Many of the results shared throughout this review have come from
studies based on answers from surveys that students have responded to. I am confident that many students who were feeling overwhelmed or stressed never got around to sharing their experiences or never had the chance to share to begin with. If this is true, then there is a much larger sample of college students who need to be made aware of how they are not alone in this matter of overwhelming stress and that there are methods through which they can manage better.

It is true that ‘reaching out to others’ and problem-solving mechanisms are the best ways to cope with stress. This has led psychologists to conclude that Cognitive Behavior Therapy is one of the best clinical solutions to overwhelmed and stressed students. Intervention and then retention of these students who are struggling is reportedly most successful.

Understanding how lives are affected by stress and learning how to overcome it could permit for more long-term success for college students in the United States.
References


After I visited the writing lab I went through my paper and tried to write stronger key sentences that were more bold and more clear. I also found that throughout my paper I was quoting my sources a lot, without summarizing very well. I decided to go through and eliminate a handful of the quotes I had been using. I feel like doing this made my paper easier to read and allowed me to be more clear with the topic that I was trying to write about. Another thing that the writing lab helped me with was general APA formatting. I hope that I was able to do a good job with correct APA throughout my paper!

When I was reading my peers' reviews I was really impressed with what they had written. They were both really great writers! I found myself noticing small errors rather than larger coherency and flow errors. I was glad that I could share positive things that I was noticing like the good funnelling, strong thesis, great synthesis and such. I found that my classmates had some grammatical errors that I was able to suggest correcting, as well as other small things like only sharing the synonym for a phrase once at the beginning. There were a couple times when I felt that a topic sentence wasn’t as strong and so I was able to suggest another way of phrasing their sentence. I also was able to notice when a word was being repeated a lot and suggest using a synonym to not be as repetitive.