

COLLEGE STUDENT STRESS: RELATIONSHIP ANXIETY, NEGATIVE AFFECT, SELF-ESTEEM, AND MORALITY-CONSCIENCE GUILT

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College life is full of new experiences – and lots of anxieties (Sax, 1997). In addition to surviving academically and preparing themselves for a career, students are evolving into independent adults, deciding on career alternatives, creating personal value systems, and developing significant social relationships. Faced with decision-making power for the first time, many are overwhelmed by their new autonomy. From choosing classes to navigating social waters, these pressures can be overwhelming. Unsuccessful coping often leads to substance abuse, depression and a host of other mental health problems (Sadava, 1993).

While forming new friendships can be exhilarating, students without adequate social skills may find college to be stressful (Oppenheimer, 1984). The desire to form romantic relationships on campus increases the likelihood of social rejection (Downy, 2004). Being overly anxious about romance can also lead to despair and dysfunction in students (Baumeister 1995).

Each of us experiences different levels of positive and negative affect in our daily lives. These levels of affect can potentially influence human behavior and cognition, especially social judgments or decisions (Schwarz, 1998; Forgas, 1995). Negative affect (such as anxiety) has been shown to correlate with increased perceived stress (Watson, 1988), and equally understandable chronic stress can heighten feelings of distress and dissatisfaction (Watson & Pennebaker, 1989).

Students may experience stress when their self-esteem is assaulted in the social arena. If those who base their self-esteem on being in a romantic relationship cannot cope with the social rejection by their peers, it could lead to negative affects such as anxiety, fear, shame, or a host of other mental health problems (Simpson, 2007). Attachment theory posits that self-esteem that is highly dependent on the regard of a romantic partner is associated with attachment insecurity, which can result in relationship difficulties (Collins & Feeney, 2000).

College students often are confronted with new moral dilemmas (to have sex with a stranger, to use drugs, to experiment sexually) that may challenge their conscience and intensify their perceived stress. They may feel guilty for behaving in ways that contradict their moral standards or the moral expectations of their parents and family. Unresolved guilt over these misgivings can lead to chronic stress and depression (Symes, 1995).

Our study investigates the relationships between psychosocial factors (anxiety in relationships, negative affect, self-esteem, morality-conscience guilt) and perceived stress in college students. We hypothesize that higher levels of stress are independently associated with 1) high anxiety in relationships; 2) high levels negative affect; 3) Low levels of self-esteem; 4) high levels of morality conscience guilt; 5) and that collectively these four psychosocial factors will account for a significant portion of variance in stress in students.

Using a cross-sectional, correlational survey design, we recruited students from a southern urban state college. Participants ($n=325$, 75.7 % females) were European-American (59.3%), African-American (19.1%), Latino(a) (9.3%), Asian-American (7.1%), Others (5.2%). Their ages ranged from 18 to 53 years ($M=20.87$, $SD=5.30$) and 19.8% were in a relationship. In addition to self-reported demographics, students completed the following measures: Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), Multi-Item Measure of Adult Romantic Attachment (MIMARA; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989), and the Revised Mosher Guilt Inventory (RMGI; Mosher, 1998). The PSS uses 14 items to measure the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful. Items tap how unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloaded respondents find their lives. The RSES uses 10 items to measure global self esteem. The RMGI uses 114 items to measure sex-guilt, hostility-guilt, and morality-conscience. We will use the 22 items that measure guilt related to moral temptations and/or guilty affect about the self. The PANAS uses 12 items to measure both positive and negative affects. We will use the 6 items that measure negative affects (e.g. restlessness, hopelessness, nervousness, worthlessness). The MIMARA uses 36 items to measure adult romantic attachment orientations (anxiety, avoidance). We will only use the 18 item anxiety subscale. The reported internal consistencies of our variables were good (PSS: $\alpha=.83$; MIMARA: $\alpha = .91$; PANAS: $\alpha = .87$; RSES: $\alpha = .78$; and RMGI: $\alpha = .90$).

We constructed an hierarchical linear regression model to explain the variance in perceived stress. After controlling for the effects of demographics, we entered all independent variables (anxiety in romantic relationships, negative-affect, self-esteem, and morality-conscience guilt,) as one block in the regression model. The regression analysis confirmed that our independent variables collectively accounted for 49.5% of the variance in perceived stress [adjusted $R^2 = .495$, $F(3,311) = 45.612$, $p<.001$].

Unsurprisingly self-esteem ($B=-.445$, $t= -.453$, $p <.001$) was negatively associated with higher levels of stress. As expected, morality-conscience guilt ($B=.383$, $t=7.511$, $p<.001$), negative affect ($B =.624$, $t=14.665$, $p<.001$), and anxiety in romantic relationships ($B =.384$, $t=7.604$, $p<.001$) were each positively associated with higher levels of stress. Finally, multicollinearity diagnostics were performed to rule out collinearity among all independent and dependent variables. The relatively high tolerance scores (.97-.99) and low VIF (1.007-1.027) suggest that we are measuring distinct and separate constructs in this model.

Our model confirmed our hypothesis that anxiety in romantic adult relationships, self-esteem, negative affect, and guilt are significant predictors of perceived stress in college students. Although causal inferences are limited due to our cross-sectional, correlational design and the use of self-report data introduces the possibility of response bias.

Our findings are important for clinicians who work with this population. Interventions that target these precursors to stress may provide clinicians with needed tools to improve the quality of life of students on campus. Future researchers should examine these constructs in prospective studies, since the direction of causality is important when developing stress reduction interventions that build in psychosocial skills.