

Negative Affect: Perceived Stress, Relationship Avoidance, and Morality-Conscience Guilt in College Students

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Our study examines the relationships between psychosocial factors (perceived stress, relationship avoidance, morality-conscience guilt) and negative affect in college students. We hypothesize that higher levels of negative affect are independently associated with 1) higher levels of perceived stress; 2) higher levels of relationship avoidance; 3) higher levels of morality-conscience guilt.

College students often face new experiences with anxiety (Sax, 1997). Unsuccessful coping can lead to substance use, depression and other mental health problems (Sadava, 1993). Each of us experiences different levels of positive and negative affect in our daily lives. This affect can potentially influence our behavior and cognition, especially social decisions (Schwarz, 1998). Negative affect is correlated with increased perceived stress that often leads to heightened feelings of distress (Watson & Pennebaker, 1989). Forming new friendships can be exhilarating but students without adequate social skills may find college life to be stressful (Oppenheimer, 1984) for the desire to form romantic attachments increases their risk of social rejection (Downy, 2004). Being overly anxious about romance can lead to dysfunction in students (Baumeister, 1995). Students often confront new moral dilemmas (to have sex with a stranger, to use drugs) that challenge their personal conscience. They may feel guilty for behaviors that conflict with their core moral values. Unresolved guilt over these misgivings can lead to a troubled conscience and chronic stress (Symes, 1995). Using stress-coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this study examined how perceived stress associated with the development of adult romantic relationships integrated with a troubled conscience can significantly predict negative emotional reactions to stress in students. We hypothesize that higher levels of negative affect are associated with 1) higher levels of perceived stress; 2) higher levels of relationship avoidance; 3) and higher levels of morality-conscience guilt.

Using a cross-sectional, correlational survey design, we recruited students from a 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%), and Others (5.2%). Their ages ranged from 18 to 53 years ($M=20.87$, $SD=5.30$) and 19.8% were in relationships. Participants completed the Positive and Negative Affect Scales ($\alpha = .87$, Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), Perceived Stress Scale ($\alpha=.83$, Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), Multi-Item Measure of Adult Romantic Attachment ($\alpha = .94$, Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), and the Revised Moshier Guilt Inventory ($\alpha = .90$, Moshier, 1998).

Entering all independent variables (perceived stress, relationship avoidance, and morality-conscience guilt) as one block in an hierarchical linear regression model, our analysis confirmed that our independent variables collectively accounted for 38.3% of variance in negative affect [adjusted $R^2 = .38$, $F(5,311) = 29.2$, $p<.001$]. Of the independent variables included in our model, only perceived stress ($B= .57$, $t= 11.5$, $p<.001$) was positively associated with negative affect in students. Multicollinearity diagnostics produced tolerance scores ranging from .82 to .98, and VIF scores ranging from 1.03 to 1.21 suggesting constructs in our model are distinct and separate.

Our model confirmed our hypotheses that perceived stress, relationship avoidance, and morality-conscience guilt are significant predictors of negative affect in college students. Causal inferences cannot be made due to our cross-sectional, correlational design and the use of self-report data introduces response bias. Interventions that target these precursors to negative affect may provide clinicians with tools to improve the quality of life in students.