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Effects of Anxiety and Stress and How Individuals Cope

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Coping strategies are efforts to deal with situations of stress, either by dealing with the problem itself or with its emotional and physiological effects or outcomes (Cohen, Ben-Zur, & Rosenfeld, 2008). One study found that staying physically fit and having good social support helps to alleviate the relationship between stress and illness and responses to anxiety (Rawson, Bloomer, & Kendall, 1994). Sense of coherence (SOC) is a personal resource that shapes people's responses to stressful situations. Studies conducted by Cohen et al. indicate that people with higher SOC reported having better coping resources and had more confidence in their abilities to cope in stressful situations. The goal of my study is to advance and expand previous research conducted concerning how college students with problems of anxiety cope with their stress. This study compared males, females, and ages among students to see if there was a significant difference between the attitudes and methods of dealing with anxiety and stress among older students and younger students and the differences between males and females overall. It is hypothesized that females will have higher levels of anxiety than that of males. It is also hypothesized that differences between older students and younger students and how they deal with their levels of anxiety and stress will differ greatly; younger students will choose more active ways to deal with stress, such as exercising, and older students will choose more relaxing activities such as meditation.

Method

Participants in this study were from general psychology classes who self-selected using Experimetrix, an Internet-based subject pool program. There were 113 total student participants, 64 females and 41 males ranging from ages 18 to 55. The participating students were presented with nine questions relating to stress and coping mechanisms. These nine questions were created by the author and pilot-tested before their presentation to the participants. The questions were part of a larger omnibus survey consisting of 221 total questions. Participants were tested in groups and were given 50 min to complete the survey. After the completion of the survey, the student participants were debriefed, thanked for their time, and given class credit for participating. Please see Table 1 for a list of questions presented to the participants of this study.

Results

There was a significant relationship between answers to the question "How old are you" and answers to the question "I exercise and do other physical activities to help reduce my stress (e.g. running, hiking, biking, working out, etc.)," which was rated on a frequency scale ranging from 0= *never* to 3= *always*, $r(107) = -0.32, p < .05$. There was not a significant difference between males ($M = 1.43, SD = 0.69$) and females ($M = 1.63, SD = 0.71$) on answers to the question "How often have you felt anxious or stressed," which was measured on a frequency scale ranging from 0= *never* to 3= *always*, $t(95) = 1.37, n.s.$ There was a finding that was not hypothesized, yet found to be significant; there was a significant difference between males ($M = 0.43, SD = 0.68$) and females ($M = 0.89, SD = 0.90$) on the question, rated on a frequency scale ranging from 0= *never* to 3= *always*, "I overeat to cope with my stress level," $t(101) = 2.80, p < .05$.

Discussion

The results of this study support the idea that age does have a significant relationship between whether or not a person exercises and does physical activity such as running, hiking, biking, or working out to help reduce their stress level or whether or not a person takes a more relaxing route to coping with stress by reading, meditating, or eating. I hypothesized that younger students would take a more physically active approach to cope with their stress such as running and I also hypothesized that older students would take a more relaxed approach to coping with their stress such as reading. The most significant outcome was that age does correlate with which method people use to cope with their stress. Specifically, younger people are coping by doing more physical activities and older people are coping by doing less physical, more relaxing activities. I also hypothesized that females would be stressed and anxious more often than males. The difference between males and females was not significant. An unexpected finding of this study was that there was a significant difference between males and females and coping with stress by overeating. More females than males tend to overeat in order to cope with stress. The results of this study speculatively confirm that, in general, younger people are more physically active than older people, specifically in the case of dealing with stress and anxiety.

Abstract

I examined the different ways in which individuals cope with anxiety and stress levels. One hundred thirteen participants received a 9-question survey related to their level of stress and anxiety and how often they cope with their stress in various ways, for example coping by exercising more often than coping by overeating depending on age and gender. All of the participants in this study were from general psychology classes at Boise State University. The results indicate there is a significant relationship between age and engaging in physical activities to cope with stress and anxiety. Results also indicate no significant differences between males and females and their stress levels. However, there is a significant difference between males and females and overeating to cope with stress; females tend to overeat to cope more often.

References

- Cohen, M., Ben-Zur, H., & Rosenfeld, M. (2008). Sense of coherence, coping strategies, and test anxiety as predictors of test performance among college students. *International Journal of Stress Management, 15*, 289-303. doi:10.1037/1072-5245.15.3.289
- Rawson, H., Bloomer, K., & Kendall, A. (1994). Stress, anxiety, depression, and physical illness in college students. *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 155*, 321-330.

Table 1

Overall Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for Survey Items

Survey Item	M	SD
1. How often have you felt anxious or stressed?	1.59	0.73
2. How often have you felt like you could not cope with all of the things you have going on in your life?	1.09	0.80
3. I use alcohol, drugs, tobacco, or other substances to cope with my stress.	0.49	0.74
4. I do things such as going to movies, watching TV, reading, day-dreaming, sleeping, or shopping to help reduce my level of stress.	1.70	0.81
5. I meditate to help me cope with my stress.	0.53	0.71
6. I exercise and do other physical activities to help reduce my stress. (e.g. running, hiking, biking, working out, etc.)	1.59	0.91
7. I overeat to cope with my stress level.	0.68	0.83
8. How old are you?	22.04	7.00
9. What is your gender?		

Notes. Items 1-7 were measured on a scale ranging from 0 = *never* to 3 = *always*. Item 8 was filled in by the participant. Item 9 was dichotomous, with 56.6% female, 36.3% male, and 5.3% of participants not answering.