Stress and Coping Mechanisms Among College Students

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to my fellow college students that are seeking higher education while juggling different responsibilities in addition to life’s challenges. Like many others I have experienced the stress that comes from working full time, attend school full time, completing an internship, and managing different challenges life has in store for us. We must remember the importance of self-care and self-love during our journey. These lessons will help us help others.
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Abstract

Stress and Coping Mechanisms Among College Students

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Master of Social Work

This research pursued the following question: Is there a relationship between self-compassion and coping mechanisms for stress among college students? Stress is something that college students face throughout their academic journey; however, this stress can be mitigated by coping skills implemented by students. In this contribution, I present the results of a systematic literature review on stress and coping mechanisms among college students to establish what research has been conducted and to what extent there is evidence of the relationship of self-compassion as a coping mechanism for stress among college students. The major topics associated to stress and how college students cope with stress are stressors, maladaptive behaviors, and coping mechanisms. Students experience numerous stressors that negatively impact their learning capabilities and practice effectiveness (Adonizio, 2012). Countless students have numerous role expectations and demands such as academics, internships, family, friends, intimate relationships, work, and conflicting demands on time, all which increase stress levels. In an effort to manage this stress, students either engage in maladaptive behaviors or implement coping mechanisms. Self-compassion can be a valuable strategy for students to practice to manage their stress. The purpose of this study is to assess if there is a relationship between higher levels of self-compassion and college students’ coping skills when dealing with stress.
Keywords: Stress, college students, self-compassion, coping mechanism, well-being, and self-acceptance.
Introduction

Stress is a common feeling experienced by individuals throughout life and it is imperative to comprehend the manner in which they cope with their stressors. This is especially true for college students. Due to the extensive academic demands college programs require from students, learners experience high levels of stress while completing their degrees. These increased levels can have a negative impact on students’ mental and physical wellbeing. Piko (2000) identified that female college students reported greater psychosomatic symptomology, increased psychological distress, and reduced perceived health status compared with their male counterparts. How students are influenced by the stressors is dependent upon the student’s healthy coping skills or maladaptive stress managing behaviors (Adonizio, 2012). Attending college is a commitment that demands considerable time and energy from the student in order to successfully complete a demanding workload (Lawson & Fuehrer, 2001). Coping strategies are vital for students during their academic journey. Students must balance scholastic responsibilities and their personal lives in addition to unanticipated stressors that life brings. Chen, Wong, Ran, and Gipson (2009) found that the health of college students improved for those who developed healthy coping skills. Furthermore, a first year student’s psychological well-being can be improved by self-compassion (Gunnell, Mosewich, McEwen, Elkins, & Crocker, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assess if there is a relationship between higher levels of self-compassion and college students’ coping skills when dealing with stress. Countless students have numerous role expectations and demands such as academic, internships, family, friends, intimate relationships, work, and conflicting demands on time, which can increase stress levels.
Students experience numerous stressors that negatively impact their learning capabilities and practice effectiveness (Adonizio, 2012). Self-compassion can be a valuable strategy for students to practice. This research pursued the following question: Is there a relationship between self-compassion and coping mechanisms for stress among college students.

**Significance of project for social work**

The results of this study can provide information for social work on a micro and macro level. Starting with the micro level, a self-compassion approach can be introduced to college students through seminars and trainings to discuss the importance of this practice. Numerous studies have indicated that unmanaged stress can lead to physical, emotional, mental, and behavioral problems. Therefore, self-compassion can provide learners with an additional healthy coping strategy to manage stress. On a macro level, findings from this research could be used in the adjustment of academic curriculum in colleges. Universities could incorporate a course or mandatory training that addresses the importance of healthy coping skills and ways in which individuals can self-manage stress, including, for instance, the need for self-compassion.

Intervention-style investigations of self-compassion and mindfulness have stressed that these characteristics are teachable across a variety of contexts (Neely et al, 2009).
Literature Review

Student stressors

Stress is something that is a natural part of our lives, experienced in different ways and at different points of our lives. This is particularly true for individuals attending college and, unfortunately, not everybody copes with stress in healthy ways. College students experience high levels of stress due to the demands placed upon them by their academics and other responsibilities. According to Bouteyre, Maurel, and Bernaud, (2007) the typical stressful daily challenges reported by college students were school-related, such as writing term papers, taking tests, and the constant pressure of studying. For numerous students, the end results of these stressors are elevated levels of anxiety and depression (Bouteyre, Maurel, & Bernaud, 2007). Another component found to have a negative impact on college students was the increased risk of social isolation for those who belong to one of the following groups: racial international students, minority, and low socioeconomic status (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). There was a correlation between social isolation and students with mental health problems, resulting in an increase in stress levels (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009).

Graduate students experience high levels of stress during their coursework and field placement in graduate programs, which impact students in various aspects of their lives (Adonizio, 2012). Graduate students described curriculum structure, financial responsibilities, and professor teaching styles as rigorous demands in their program (Collins et al., 2010). Any additional dissatisfaction is compounded with the need to meet with peers for a project, and/or to meet with professors to address concerns.

The number of working students with additional responsibilities, such as significant others and children, experience increased stress outside of their academic responsibilities. The
added stress from balancing work while tending to familial responsibilities increases the stress faced by college students. Additional stress and demands to the student can negatively impact relationships and can compromise the wellbeing of the students.

**Single mother students**

Many single parents, specifically mothers, enroll in higher education but often do not graduate with a degree due to experiencing numerous difficulties (Goldrick & Sorensen, 2010). Poverty, child care, and support systems are three significant areas affecting single moms, in turn, creating stress for the student. Mothers in higher education are more susceptible to experience hardships than male counterparts (Lynch, 2008) because of the difficulty in accessing childcare while they attended school. Research shows that this factor alone plays a significant difference in the mother’s level of persistence in completing their education. Single mothers are often isolated and the lack of social support leads to mental and physical stress (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012). Poverty, childcare, and support systems all play a significant role when a single mother decides to better her life by attending college.

Research suggests that having a strong family support system is one of the most important factors to a single mother (Son & Bauer, 2010). Research has presented several adaptive coping mechanisms used by single mothers, such as pets, exercise, internal strength, resilience, humor, counseling, arts, and volunteering (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012). Furthermore, even though it is more difficult for single mothers than single fathers to further their education, those with adequate support from friends and family are better able to cope with their stress.
Mental health

Stress related disorders are prevalent among college students. According to Kessler et al. (2005), the onset of most lifetime mental disorders occur during (or right before) the archetypal collage age. These illnesses may be aggravated or triggered by the numerous stressors students experience in their college life, which include, but are not limited to, changes in personal relationships, irregular sleep patterns, and academic pressures (kadison, 2004).

According to Beiter et al. (2015), a recent study conducted by the Anxiety Association of America stated that seven out of 10 adults in the United States claim to experience anxiety or stress between a minimum and a moderate level on a daily basis. These mental illnesses are more evident with college students. Additionally, students can also suffer from depression which can negatively impact college students. According to Wolfram (2010), in the past 12 months in the United States, 10% of college students have been diagnosed or treated for depression.

Though a better way of life and financial independence is something that our society values, it also creates additional stress. Over the years, obtaining a college degree has gained more notoriety as the way to improve one’s life and accomplish success, and as a result, many students leave their home to obtain a secondary education. The transition itself can cause depression, anxiety, and stress. Some of the symptoms students have experienced while transitioning to a new school include appetite disturbance, depression, and concentration problems (Price et al., 2007). Further, homesickness is a direct byproduct of moving to a university far away from home. It is imperative that colleges and universities have the right staff to provide support to students in need of assistance; however, education to manage mental health
should also be provided to students. According to Zhang et al (2016), self-compassion has been increasing in recognition as a positive quality to facilitate mental wellbeing.

**Maladaptive behavior**

The negative symptoms accompanying anxiety, stress, and depression can be incredibly debilitating, and it is vital to properly treat them in order to prevent negative behaviors. Doom and Haeffel (2013) indicate the harmful behaviors students with depression can engage in, such as smoking, lack of exercise, poor diet, and noncompliance with recommendations made by a medical team as they develop and engage in maladaptive behaviors.

Many college students do not have the necessary tools to manage the stress in their lives, and because of their inability to cope, students may turn to maladaptive behaviors such as alcohol and drugs to alleviate the pressures they are experiencing. In addition to the different stress students experience in college which can lead to substance abuse in an effort to cope with the stress, peer pressure and the desire to belong are added components that may lead to additional stress. As a result, students may engage in substance abuse and become dependent as they develop maladaptive behaviors. Furthermore, during early college years, students tend to experiment with substance abuse, which increases their susceptibility to engage in maladaptive behaviors.

Cigarettes, alcohol, and illegal substances are not the only elements students abuse in an effort to manage their stress. According to Hanson et al. (2013), students who try to manage more than just their education, or face pressure to perform well in their academics, can at times become susceptible to abusing other types of drugs, such as Adderall, in an effort to improve concentration and mental alertness (DeSantis AD, Webb EM, and Noar SM, 2008). Some students will abuse the ADHD drug for nonmedical use, as well (Hanson et al, 2008). According
to Teter CJ et al. (2005), the ADHD drug is used as an appetite suppressant or to counteract the effects of other drugs.

What is self-compassion?

Neff (2003b) defined self-compassion as a healthy form of self-acceptance that includes three components. The first is a tendency to treat oneself kindly in the face of perceived insufficiency by engaging in self-soothing and positive self-talk. The second component involves recognizing that one’s discomfort is an unavoidable part of the human experience. This recognition of “common humanity” stimulates a sense of connection to others even in the face of feelings of isolation and disappointment. Lastly, self-compassionate individuals are able to face their own agonizing thoughts without evading or exaggerating them, and manage their disillusionment and frustration by quelling self-pity and melodrama.

Self-compassion as a coping mechanisms

Coping skills can help individuals navigate through challenges brought on when experiencing stress, and would help students to be self-reliant, solve problems, and make informed choices which in turn promote their physical and psychological well-being. Students should establish the efficacy of a stress coping program as a means for decreasing perceived stress and increasing the proactive attitude towards stress. Furthermore, self-compassion was also found to increase first year students’ psychological well-being (Gunnell, Mosewich, McEwen, Eklund, & Crocker, 2017).

Trompetter, De Kleine, and Bohlmeijer (2016) found that self-compassion mediated the negative relationship between positive mental health and psychopathology in college students. Self-compassion can be a mechanism that enhances stress resiliency by promoting emotion regulation in individuals (Trompetter et al., 2016), and can serve to decrease certain...
psychopathology disorders, including depression, that affect individuals (Neff & Germer, 2013). Beck, Verticchio, Seeman, Milliken, and Schaab (2017) found the overall stress level of college students enrolled in various graduate programs decreased after completing various mindfulness sessions. Mindfulness is an important component of self-compassion.

According to Neff & Germer (2013) self-compassion can aid to decrease certain psychopathology disorders including depression among other mental health disorders that affect many individuals in our society. Therefore, graduate students can struggle with various mental health illnesses impacting their coping strategies for stress, consequently, self-compassion can counter those challenges by becoming a protective factor (Neff & Germer, 2013).

Interventions of self-compassion and mindfulness have emphasized that these characteristics are teachable across a variety of situations. For instance, Shapiro et al. (2005) established that a two month course implementing mindfulness to reduce stress increased health care workers’ self-compassion and decreased their reported stress. In the context of therapeutic exercises, Neff et al. (2007a,b) found significant changes in undergraduates’ self-compassion levels after they participated in a “Gestalt two-chair” exercise (Greenberg1983; Wagner-Moore2004), which consisted of students voicing self-criticisms and receiving a counselor’s guidance to answer self-disparaging statements. Results indicated that the intervention increased students’ self-compassion scores even when initial anxiety was controlled. Moreover, the improvement in individuals’ self-compassion was consistent for over a three week period of time. In a controlled investigation containing counseling psychology graduate students, Shapiro et al. (2007) sustained the notion that direct instruction in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) techniques and practices significantly lowers individuals’ reports of stress, worry, and anxiety. In contrast to students who did not participate in the 10 week course on MBSR,
participates yielded greater improvements across measures of affect, anxiety, stress, worry, and mindfulness.

Model leading conceptualization

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model explains the systems that impact students at a micro, mezzo, and macro level. The micro system is the individual’s overall functioning; the mezzo system consist of the groups influencing the individual; and the macro system is the economic, social, and political conditions affecting the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Two essential elements of this theory include: the interface where the exchange take place between the individual and the social environment and the adaptation representing an individual’s ability to acclimate to the bordering environments and coping in the manner individuals manage stressful conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Different systems interconnect with each other, consequently affecting the student in multiple stages starting with the micro system when the individual interacts with the groups surrounding them which includes of friends, family, and classmates (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Furthermore, the different clusters impact the student’s individual functioning if stressors are present and the school demands impact the student’s academic responsibilities. Under the ecological model, college students who possess higher levels of self-compassion would have a superior ability to cope with stress due to the students possessing a healthy psychological well-being.

Lastly, the ecological model considers all three different systems and how they influence each other. Subsequently, when college students experience stressors from the micro, mezzo, and macro systems their well-being and overall performance can be impacted (Bryce et al., 2014). Therefore, the ecological model illustrates how college students are influenced by
different environmental factors impacting their coping skills with stress and their level of self-compassion (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

**Limitations on current studies**

Many studies have been conducted about the effects of self-compassion on a number of individuals ranging from people with chronic illnesses, to persons with mental disorders to college students. However, the majority of studies of self-compassion as a coping mechanism among college students is limited to undergraduate students. A significant amount of the research is performed with participants in their late teens and twenties which neglects an older population which typically is also experiencing more stress due to added life responsibilities people acquire as they get older. There is limited if any research available of studies with participants from online programs. With the numerous online programs available to students who typically have a busy schedules and as result attend online classes due to its flexibility in schedule to accommodate those with demanding schedules. Additional, limitations result from selection of studies, choice of relevant outcome, interpretation of heterogeneity, methods of analysis, and generalization and application of results. Additionally, some of the studies also measured for other coping mechanisms such as spirituality or religiosity in addition to self-compassion which may have affected the results yielded. Lastly when the studies measured for stress levels they did not measure how easily participants became stressed.
Discussion

This study sought to explore the relationship between higher levels of self-compassion and college students’ coping skills when dealing with stress. It is vital to understand the different ways students cope with the numerous stressors scholars face during their academic career and the role self-compassion has in aiding them manage their responses due to the potential effect this stressors can have on them. Students experience stress from their academic responsibilities, work, family, friends, significant others, and internships. This stress can have a negative impact on students’ mental and physical wellbeing. However, research indicates that self-compassion can reduce the negative effects academic stress has on college student’s performance and well-being. If students were to practice self-compassion to combat the negative effects of stress an increase in the student’s wellbeing can be expected as well as a decrease of maladaptive behaviors.

Students who practice self-compassion or any of its three main components experienced increased levels of well-being. Furthermore, the implementation of self-kindness has demonstrated to foster self-forgiveness and the ability to better manage the effects of stress. As a result students can better cope with their deficiencies which as a result can decrease self-blame and critical judgment. This research pursued the following question: Is there a relationship between self-compassion and coping mechanisms for stress among college students.

The results of this study can provide information for social work on a micro and macro level. Starting with the micro level, a self-compassion approach can be introduced to college students through seminars and trainings to inform college students about this method. Numerous studies have indicated that unmanaged stress can lead to physical, emotional, mental, and behavioral problems to develop. Therefore, self-compassion can provide learners with an
additional healthy coping strategy. Additionally, for social work students that utilize self-compassion as a coping mechanism they can continue to practice self-care by utilizing self-compassion which would enable social workers once they are in the field to care for themselves which would enable them to provide better care for others and teach them how to care for themselves. On a macro level, findings from this research can result in the adjustment of academic curriculum in colleges to incorporate a course or mandatory training addressing healthy coping skills for stress which can include self-compassion. This study can inspire departments at colleges to make the appropriate changes in their curriculum to incorporate self-compassion courses for students. Intervention-style investigations of self-compassion and mindfulness have stressed that these characteristics are teachable across a variety of contexts (Neely et al, 2009).
Limitations

As with the majority of studies, the design of the current study is subject to limitations. The quality of the review outcomes are dependent on the quality of the literature being reviewed. The comprehensiveness of the literature search is also critical in the quality of the systematic review. The heterogeneous nature of the study may have affected the review, perhaps if it would have been a group more homogeneous the quality of the research would have improved. In conclusion future research should implement a cross-sectional study seeking to explore the relationship between stress and self-compassion as a coping mechanism among online MSW students. This will provide a more distinct group of students from what previous research has provided. Furthermore, it will be important to add a comparison group with the online students to identify any differences between graduate programs. Future research can recruit a sample size more than 100 participants in an effort to generalize the results to a larger population and complete randomization for the participant selection.

The purpose of this study was to assess if there is a relationship between higher levels of self-compassion and college students’ coping skills when dealing with stress. Countless students have numerous role expectations and demands such as academic, internships, family, friends, intimate relationships, work and conflicting demands on time, which can increase stress. Students experience numerous stressors that negatively impact their learning capabilities and practice effectiveness (Adonizio, 2012). The literature demonstrated that self-compassion can be a valuable strategy for students to practice to manage their high levels of stress. This research pursued the following question: Is there a relationship between self-compassion and coping mechanisms for stress among college students.
References


