

Stress and Coping among College Students during a COVID-19 Red Alert Status on Campus

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INTRODUCTION

A number of studies have found that college students have experienced high rates of stress during the pandemic. For example, one study conducted at a U.S. university during the pandemic reported that as much as approximately 25% of participants surveyed reported severe stress (Lee et al., 2021). A second study, also at a U.S. university, found that 71% of the students surveyed reported that they experienced greater stress and anxiety as a result of the pandemic (Son et al., 2020). Despite the high rates of stress among college students, research on students’ use of coping strategies has been mixed. One study at a small U.S. college found that students used a mix of positive and negative coping strategies, although they used more negative strategies than a non-student adult sample (Munsell et al., 2019). One international study also reported that students used a variety of coping strategies during the pandemic (Awoke et al., 2021). Additionally, a multi-university study in Poland found that the use of coping strategies varied by sociodemographic characteristics (Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021). In light of the need to further understand college students’ stress and coping during the COVID-19 pandemic, the current study examined stress and coping strategies during a campus red alert at a mid-sized U.S. university.

OBJECTIVES / HYPOTHESES

- 1) To identify the rates of coping strategies among college students.
- 2) To examine the correlation between perceived stress and different coping strategies.
- 3) To test whether perceived stress predicted different coping strategies.

METHODS

Participants

This research study included 198 college students from a mid-size liberal arts university in the northeast region of the United States. The sample included:
84% Female, 92% White
39% Freshmen, 21% Sophomore, 21% Junior, 18% Senior, and 1% 5th Year Undergraduate
100% Enrolled Full-time
53% Residing on Campus
19 Average Age

Procedures

Data collected from an online survey sent out to all undergraduate students 30 days after the COVID-19 red alert status was instituted in the Fall of 2020 were analyzed.

METHODS

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS: Cohen et al., 1983) assesses perceived subjective stress experienced over the past thirty days. The scale includes ten items, pertaining to feelings (i.e., In the last month, how often have you felt you were on top of things?) and thoughts (i.e., In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?). Response options for these ten items include ‘never’, ‘almost never’, ‘sometimes’, ‘fairly often’, and ‘very often’ and are coded from zero to four. A total perceived stress score can be calculated and respondents can be categorized as low, moderate, or high perceived stress.

The Brief COPE consists of 28 items originally part of the 60-item COPE scale (Carver, 1997). The scale consists of the subscales of self-distraction, active coping, denial, substance use, use of emotional support, use of instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, religion, and self-blame. Response options for these 28 items include, ‘I haven't been doing this at all’, ‘I've been doing this a little bit’, ‘I've been doing this a medium amount’, and ‘I've been doing this a lot’ and were coded from one to four. Students were asked to respond based on the past 30 days.

RESULTS

Table 1. Average Scores on Coping Strategies and Correlation Results of Coping Strategies and Total Perceived Stress

Coping Scales	M	SD	r
Self-Distraction	6.19	1.50	.114
Active Coping	5.30	1.56	-.318**
Denial	2.68	1.33	.334**
Substance Use	3.12	1.82	.185**
Use of Emotional Support	4.97	1.91	.005
Use of Instrumental Support	4.42	2.03	-.037
Behavioral Disengagement	3.77	1.80	.607**
Venting	4.26	1.38	.365**
Positive Reframing	5.20	1.92	-.138
Planning	5.34	1.75	-.147*
Humor	5.15	2.17	.181*
Acceptance	5.83	1.49	-.180*
Religion	3.81	2.00	-.053
Self-Blame	4.66	2.14	.678**

RESULTS

Table 2. Linear Regression Analyses Predicting Coping Strategies by Total Perceived Stress

Coping Strategies	B	SE	p
Self-Distraction	.024	.015	.115
Active Coping	-.070	.015	.000
Denial	.062	.013	.000
Substance Use	.047	.018	.009
Use of Emotional Support	.001	.019	.946
Use of Instrumental Support	-.010	.021	.610
Behavioral Disengagement	.153	.014	.000
Venting	.072	.013	.000
Positive Reframing	-.037	.019	.055
Planning	-.036	.017	.041
Humor	.055	.022	.012
Acceptance	-.038	.015	.013
Religion	-.015	.020	.466
Self-Blame	.204	.016	.000

DISCUSSION

Perceived stress during the red alert status was associated with several maladaptive coping strategies, such as denial, substance use and behavioral disengagement. Whereas perceived stress was inversely associated with positive coping strategies, such as active coping, planning, and acceptance. Prevention and health promotional efforts on campus should include increased access to the wellness center, coping skills-related informational workshops, and programmatic opportunities that foster social interactions.

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- * p<.05, **p<.01