

## **STUDENT STRESS, COPING SKILLS, AND SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Stress is an unavoidable entity in life. However, students are experiencing stress at heightened levels from a variety of sources. How students deal with the increased stress levels is of utmost importance for schools due to the direct correlation between a student's ability to manage stress in a positive, productive manner and his or her academic success. The researcher conducted a review of the literature regarding the sources of stress for students, which coping strategies are employed by students, and the types of school-based interventions currently being used by schools as well as the effectiveness of the intervention programs. The results of the research indicated trauma, societal issues, and academic pressures are sources of stress for students while students are coping with the stress in positive manners, such as task and time management and diversions, as well as with negative mechanisms, such as unethical actions and substance abuse. Schools were found to be in a prime position to help students learn positive coping skills in the face of stressful situations; however, the need of mental health services and the amount of services being provided were found to be in contradiction of the other. The literature review found a need for continued research into preventative and intervention programs aimed at assisting students in stress management and mental health services.*

**Keywords:** *stress, coping strategies, intervention*

### **INTRODUCTION**

During adolescence, boys and girls both experience physical and mental changes that can increase stress levels (Shaughnessy-Dedrick, Suldo, Roth, & Fefer, 2014); however, surges in school violence, state and federal educational requirements, societal pressures, and mental health issues have all contributed to the heightened stress levels the typical student feels daily. Stress is defined as the result of the internal and external pressures one experiences that exceed his or her

resources to manage the pressures (Aafreen, Priya, & Gayathri, 2018). Students no longer attend school in order to learn basic skills. Instead, students today must balance the fear of violence, increased graduation requirements, pressure to be accepted into an appropriate college, and the increased prevalence of mental health issues that can either cause more stress or arise as the result of the increased stress levels of students. Schools, communities, and parents have the challenge of teaching students to be resilient while holding them to the expected standards. A review of literature revealed the source of stress for students is wide ranging, students are employing both positive and negative coping skills, and schools have implemented school based intervention programs at varying degrees.

### **SOURCES OF STRESS**

The United States Department of Health and Human Resources (2016) reported 4.2 million children were referred to state agencies for possible abuse or exposure to a traumatic event, such as neglect, physical abuse, or sexual abuse in 2016. With the high rates of children associated with traumatic events, Aho, Bjorklund, and Svedin (2017) compared peritraumatic reactions to occurrences of posttraumatic stress symptoms after a traumatic exposure in order to gain a better understanding of reactions and responses of children who experience any form of trauma. The study administered the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (SAQ/JVQ), Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSCC), and a questionnaire asking the children to answer questions about reactions they had after experiencing any type of trauma. The study included 5332 students with the average age of 17.3. The report concluded 84.1 percent of the students surveyed had experienced some type of traumatic event making these experiences quite common. Out of the percentage of students who have experienced trauma, seventy-five percent reacted with at least one form of peritraumatic reaction, whether that reaction be physiological arousal, peritraumatic dissociation, or intervention thoughts (Aho et al., 2017). Aho et al. (2017) concluded the earlier peritraumatic reactions are identified, the quicker children at risk for posttraumatic stress disorder may be recognized and treatment offered. The implications of the study point to the high prevalence of traumatic events children experience and how the stress from the event may affect their functioning.

With the technological advances of the century, another source of stress children, adolescents, and teens deal with on a consistent basis is cyberbullying. When taken in conjunction with other forms of trauma, such as sexual abuse, children who have experienced at least one form of trauma are more likely to become victims of cyberbullying (Hebert, Cenat, Blais, Lavoie, & Guerrier, 2016). Hebert et al. (2016) compared the occurrence of cyberbullying of sexually abused

children with the occurrence of this type of bullying of non-sexually abused children in order to determine whether the previous trauma put the targeted population at a higher risk of being revictimized. The study surveyed high school students from thirty-four schools with 6,780 students completing the Quebec Youths' Romantic Relationship Survey (QYRRS).

As a result, the researchers found teenage girls were not only the victims of cyberbullying more often than boys, but they were also more often the perpetrators as well. Additionally, girls who had been victims of sexual abuse were twice as likely to become victims of cyberbullying than the participants who have never experienced the trauma of sexual abuse (Hebert et al., 2016). The study concurred with the findings of Aho et al. (2017) in that the stress invoked from traumatic experiences by children have lasting effects on the functioning of the children implying the need for increased preventative and intervention efforts to be made by educators, mental health professionals, and families. Traumatic experiences are a great source of stress on students and have a resounding impact on many other areas of students' lives; however, academic pressure is also a source of stress that impacts the achievement of adolescents and teens.

Giota and Gustafsson (2016) analyzed the perceived academic demands on students to determine the relationship between academic pressure, stress, and mental health as well as the differences experienced by males versus females. The study collected longitudinal data when the 9,000 participants were thirteen years old and again when the same participants were sixteen years old. When the students were in sixth grade (age thirteen), the participants were administered an aptitude test as well as a research questionnaire developed by the research team. During the follow up data collection point when the students were in ninth grade (age sixteen), the participants only received the questionnaire. The findings of the study revealed two significant points (Giota & Gustafsson, 2016).

First, the students had lower levels of perceived academic demands and stress during the sixth grade than when they were in ninth grade, in which all indications lead to the conclusion the students perceived the demands of schooling to be higher as they entered high school. The second noteworthy finding specified girls had considerable higher levels of perceived academic demands resulting in higher stress levels than boys during the ninth grade year. However, when the students were in sixth grade, there were no notable differences in the perceived demands or stress level between the genders. Giota and Gustafsson (2016) concluded the higher levels of perceived demands and stress levels would lead to lower academic achievement due to the psychological strain the students experienced making academic related tasks more difficult to accomplish well.

On the contrary, however, Suldo and Shaunessy-Dedrick (2013) found that the increased levels of stress associated with rigorous academic programs, such as

the Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs do not cause detrimental psychological harm to students. The researchers sought to determine whether students in academically rigorous programs experienced decreased academic functioning in relation to the increased perceived stress levels of the demanding coursework along with a decrease in social interactions and life satisfaction. The study included 480 students from four high schools where the participants completed self-report questionnaires as well as having their school records analyzed by the research team. Upon the completion of the analyses, the researchers found that even though the high achieving students experienced higher levels of stress than their general education counterparts, the level of stress did not decrease academic achievement and the students experienced average or above average psychological functioning and social interactions when compared to their peers (Suldo & Shaunessy-Derrick, 2013). The results of the study implied the need for researchers and educators to further explore the positive outcomes associated with a highly rigorous academic program for collegebound students and possibly expand existing programs to offer more benefits to the students. Although academics is a source of stress for all students while trauma is another source of stress for certain student populations, all students have unique methods of coping with the stress, whether those approaches are positive or negative.

### **COPING SKILLS**

Regardless of the source of the stress students experience, all stress has the potential to impact academic success. Therefore, the coping skills students employ during school hours and outside of the school day also have residual effects on academic functioning. Coping skills utilized by adolescents and teens have been well documented in research, both positive and negative (Bender, Rosenkrans, & Crane, 1999; Nichter, Nuchter, & Carkoglu, 2007; Walburg, Moncla, & Mialhes, 2014; Zarei, Hashemi, Sadipoor, Delavar, & Khoshnevisan, 2016; Shaunessy-Dedrick, Suldo, Roth, & Fefer, 2014; Leonard et al., 2015; Redding, 2017; Wilhsson, Svedberg, Hogdin, & Nygren, 2017). Some coping skills increase academic productivity while others hinder a student's ability to focus, concentrate, understand, and excel in the school setting.

Wilhsson, Svedberg, Hogdin, and Nygren (2017) sought to understand the differences in the coping strategies girls and boys use in order to manage stress developed from schooling requirements. The study was qualitative in nature with interviews during focus group sessions being the primary data collection tool. The participants of the study included twenty females and twenty-two male students all being between the ages of fourteen and fifteen. As a result of the focus group discussions and interviews, the research team found the students utilized three

primary coping skills. These skills included how students prioritize their future plans through the choices they make, how and when students find time for themselves to relax, and family and friend interactions (Wilhsson et al., 2017). While both sexes acknowledged the strategies outlined as their coping mechanisms, there were notable differences between how each of the genders described and utilized the strategies. Girls expressed more interest in their future plans and how those goals shape their current priorities due to the pressure they felt to be highly successful in the academic realm causing more frequent adverse effects to their health (Wilhsson et al., 2017). Boys, however, presented with fewer concerns regarding their future as well as a reduced perception of school related stress while seeking support from friends and family through physical activities. Ultimately, girls prioritized schooling first while boys placed more emphasis on their leisure activities over their academic obligations. The researchers found the implications of the study to point towards more health interventions to be incorporated in the academic realm in an attempt to reduce school related stress (Wilhsson et al., 2017). Generalized coping strategies are common among all students; however, higher achieving students who feel increased levels of pressure to succeed employ advanced strategies in order to deal with the stress they feel.

Shaunessy-Dedrick, Suldo, Roth, and Fefer (2014) sought to describe how students participating in rigorous academic programs handled the increased levels of stress felt with the advanced pressures of the programs. Detailed interviews were conducted with the thirty participants from three school districts composed of socioeconomic, culture, and linguistic diverse students. The school leadership teams assisted the researchers in identifying students who met the research criteria. During the data analysis, the researchers established the majority of the participants believed the most effective strategies to use when dealing with school related stress included time and task management, temporary diversions from school work, and cognitive reappraisal (Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2014). Peer support and feelings of connectedness to other school activities and students were also important coping mechanisms, according to the students interviewed. The research team concluded support teams, such as teachers, families, and friends, all play a major role in helping students on an advanced academic track stay focused and cope with the demands of the coursework. Teachers of the rigorous courses must incorporate strategies and techniques into their instructional methods that aids students during these high intensity times. The study also implied the need for schools to take a more focused look into school-based mental health resources for students who have increased academic pressures (Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2014). While many students utilize positive coping skills, such as time management, family and friend relationships, and diversions from academic demands, many students find refuge in negative coping mechanisms.

The college admissions processes have continued to become more and more high pressured (Redding, 2017) causing students to employ negative strategies to handle the pressure. Redding (2017) acknowledged the stress associated with the demanding requirements on high school students and explored how students in these situations react to the pressure. Academic achievement may be viewed as a personal success or failure by adolescents leading to negative and detrimental psychological consequences (Redding, 2017). During the study, the researcher analyzed four student collaborative articles published in the *Stuyvesant Spectator*, the student newspaper for the prestigious Stuyvesant High School in Brooklyn, New York, which had come under fire for a cheating scandal affecting the admissions of many of the school's students in Ivy League universities. The articles were analyzed using constructivist grounded theory (Redding, 2017).

The researcher concluded students who attend prestigious college-preparatory secondary programs are driven to succeed by several factors including an internal drive, pressure from family and parents, and the expectation they must meet the standards set forth by the administrators, teachers, and alumni of the respected high schools. Therefore, students no longer view cheating as a negative, but as a means to helping them meet the academic pressures, a necessity, and common place in their schools (Redding, 2017). The study implied the need for further research into the actual motivation students have to use the negative coping strategy in response to the academic pressure and stress they feel in an attempt to combat the unethical mentality that has permeated many schools and academic programs. In addition to academic dishonesty, students may turn to illegal and unhealthy coping strategies in order to survive the stress they are under.

Drug and alcohol experimentation during the teens years is quite common in the United States (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2018); however, students are also turning to substance abuse as a coping mechanism for stress. Walburg, Moncla, and Mialhes (2015) examined how high school students used cannabis as a reaction to burnout and stress, how often students used the substance, and how great the dependency on the drug became for the students. The research team administered questionnaires to 286 students questioning their feelings towards school, their use of the drug, how often they consumed cannabis, and whether the students were dependent on the substance. The students who took part in the study were of an average age of 16.5 with 115 boys and 171 girls involved (Walburg et al., 2015). As a result of the study, boys were found to use cannabis at notably higher rates than girls in terms of how frequent they consume the drug while the actual number of students using the drug was consistent across both genders. The study was in agreeance with other research in that girls experience higher perceptions of demands from school causing increased levels of

stress than boys (Giota & Gustafsson, 2016; Wilhsson, Svedberg, Hogdin, & Nygren, 2017) suggesting the proportionate numbers of high school female users of cannabis is connected to the feelings of perceived school demands (Walburg et al., 2015).

Another noteworthy finding of the study was a negative or hostile attitude towards the purpose of school was a greater indicator of cannabis use than feelings of exhaustion towards school (Walburg et al., 2015). The differences in the attitude towards the purpose of schooling was a significant aspect leading to adolescent use of the drug. The researchers found that the implications of the study were for special attention to be given to the at-risk student groups, such as those with learning disabilities or lack of parental support, in attempt to combat teen cannabis use as a coping strategy for stress. Additionally, an understanding that the two factors of a lack of interest in school or a lack of understanding of the purpose of school and cannabis use are interchangeable. The first acknowledged factors can lead to cannabis use while cannabis use can also lead to the lack of interest or motivation for schooling (Walburg et al., 2015). Schools and school-based health centers are in a prime position to help reduce the sources of stress for students as well as help them develop positive coping strategies.

### **SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS**

Many times, students are only identified as having mental health related issues and receive services for these issues at school. Therefore, schools must be aware of their position and allot resources to helping students manage stress and address their mental health needs. Prochaska, Le, Baillargeon, and Temple (2016) explored the need for more comprehensive mental health screening in schools through examining the results of three mental health screening tools administered to students in seven public schools in Texas. The purpose of the study was to help drive policy reforms to align with the demands of mental health services in schools through mental health screening of adolescents. There were 1,042 total students from five school districts who participated in the study. The students answered self-reported questionnaires, including screening assessments for generalized anxiety disorder, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, with data collected beginning when they were in either the ninth or tenth grades (Prochaska et al., 2016). The final data was collected when the research group was nearing the completion of high school. The findings of the study revealed that the percentage of students who had positive screenings for any of the three mental health conditions assessed were high, but out of those positive screenings, the percentage of students who had also received mental health counseling services in the past were low indicating that the mental health services need was actually higher than the

rate of services being provided to students (Prochaska et al., 2016). The implications of the study revealed the need for a wide ranging implementation of mental health screening among high school students leading to increased preventative and intervention measures taken by schools and mental health professionals within the schools. The researchers also determined the need for public policies to be created and enforced to help understand and improve mental health among high school students (Prochaska et al., 2016). In addition to the mental health professionals working with students, teachers are also in a desirable position to help students deal with stress.

Conner, Miles, and Pope (2014) analyzed the relationship between positive teacher student relationships and student stress levels, anxiety, and psychological and physical wellbeing. The purpose of the study was to determine to what extent teachers have an impact on student academic worry, how students internalize problems, and any physical health symptoms students may display (Conner et al., 2014). The research team identified 5,557 students from fourteen high performing schools. The participants answered questionnaires and surveys pertaining to the areas of their perceptions of teacher support and school support, academic worry, school stress, mental health, and physical health (Conner et al., 2014). The results showed the students who felt they had support from at least one adult within the school, primarily teachers, were more likely to not suffer from physical and psychological health issues when compared to the students who did not feel they had a support system within the school. The students who indicated they did not have at least one adult within their school they felt supported them had increased rates of anxiety, stress, internalizing symptoms, and physical ailments (Conner et al., 2014). Students are more likely to be successful, have better health, and are better able to cope with stressful situations when they have at least one adult figure within their school that they feel close to, can confide in, and feel supported by. The researchers found the future implications of the study to be that teachers do not only need to care about their students, but they must take proactive steps to ensure the students perceive the teachers care as there seems to be some disconnect between the feelings of the teacher and how the students perceive the feelings (Conner et al., 2014).

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The reviewed literature found students in today's schools face many sources of stress in their lives. These sources may include trauma they have experienced in the past or are currently experiencing, family and society, and academically related. As a response to the stress teens and adolescents feel, students develop coping strategies, both positive and negative. Some of the positive coping



strategies outlined in the research include time management, prioritizing their choices to support future plans, engaging in diversions from stressful activities, and seeking support within families and friendships (Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2014; Wilhsson et al., 2017). Contradictorily, the negative coping mechanisms often employed by students include cheating and unethical behavior and substance abuse (Walburg et al., 2015; Redding, 2017). In the face of increased stress levels of and negative and harmful coping responses by students, educators, administrators, health care providers, and mental health professionals can work to implement reform policies, preventative measures, and interventions that aid the screening of mental health issues (Prochaska et al., 2016) and implementation of support systems (Conner et al., 2014) that work to reduce student stress and mental health issues while increasing academic achievement. Student wellbeing and success are the two most important factors for schools and communities to consider when developing plans and procedures to assist students in dealing with stress and mental health. Further research should focus on the strategies schools, teachers, parents, and professionals can employ to enable students to successfully cope with adversity and prosper.

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