



Stress reactivity and vulnerability to depressed mood in college students

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Abstract

Two studies reported here found that in response to common, minor stressors, stress reactivity (defined as mean stress per stressor) was a stronger predictor than total stress of depressed mood in traditional and nontraditional college men and women. A prospective study found individual reactivity scores varied over time, but relationships between stress and depressed mood held across four monthly assessments. Stress reactivity also accounted for more incremental variance in depressed mood than total stress after controlling for previous depressed mood. When students in the cross-sectional study were classified into reactivity groups, scores for depressed mood increased steadily for students in the very low through high reactivity groups, as did percentages of students with depressed mood scores that might indicate depression in normal populations. This study also found that stress reactivity was more strongly correlated than total stress with neuroticism and its facets (or traits) of depression, anxiety, and vulnerability to stress in the five-factor model of personality. Taken together, these studies suggest that elevated stress reactivity to minor stressors may indicate diminished ability to cope with everyday challenges and may predict increased vulnerability to depressed mood in a normal population.

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1. Introduction

The assumption that stress accumulates over time to cause or trigger episodes of disorder (Rabkin & Struening, 1976) has guided research in stress and health for over three decades. It was a guiding principle in the pioneering development of the Social Readjustment Rating Scale

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(Holmes & Rahe, 1967) and subsequent life events inventories, which measure cumulative stress from exposure to minor and major events requiring adaptive responses. Sufficient stress to trigger disorder may accumulate from exposure to one or more very stressful events or a greater number of less stressful events. Many studies have supported this model by demonstrating reliable, but generally modest correlations between cumulative life events stress and negative physical and psychological health outcomes (Johnson & Sarason, 1979).

More recent efforts to assess stress have often employed “hassles” inventories, which measure stress from commonly occurring, minor stressors. There are theoretical and practical reasons for this approach. Many researchers found that major stressors occurred too infrequently to account for most of the stress that people experienced. Furthermore, many researchers study stress and outcomes in convenience samples such as college students, who generally experience few major stressors and little serious disorder, but frequent minor stressors, negative mood states, and deficits in performance. Hassles inventories are also based on the assumption that stress accumulates to cause or trigger negative outcomes. This approach has been successful and many studies found cumulative stress from minor stressors was a stronger predictor of physical and psychological disorder than stress from major life events, even when the same studies employed both measures of stress (DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982; Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981; Monroe, 1983).

Hassles and life events inventories differ primarily in the nature of events listed. Life events inventories include items that cover a broader range of potential stress and required adaptation. Although the cognitive-transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) posits that individuals may vary greatly in appraising the stressfulness of any event, life events inventories include some items that most people might rate as slightly stressful and some items that most people might rate as extremely stressful. Individuals could achieve high cumulative stress scores by experiencing one or more very stressful events or a greater number of less stressful events. In contrast, and consistent with their name, hassles inventories do not contain any items that most people would consider especially stressful. They were developed in response to the hypothesis that the cumulative effect of frequent exposure to everyday stressors could trigger disorder. Yet, some hassles inventories allow respondents to rate minor stressors as extremely stressful and some respondents do so. Brantley and Jones (1989) suggested that individuals who rate minor stressors as very stressful may be dispositionally or temporarily more vulnerable to stressors and less able to cope. They might be expected to accumulate stress more quickly and be more likely to experience negative affective states than individuals who rate minor stressors as less stressful. It is also possible, however, that such individuals by virtue of their vulnerabilities to stress, may experience greater negative affect even if they do not accumulate more total stress.

Felsten (2002) tested this hypothesis by measuring mean stress per stressor (stress reactivity) and total stress in response to minor stressors, and found stress reactivity was the stronger predictor of depressed mood in college women. Reactivity was also moderately correlated with neuroticism, a stable dimension of personality associated with ineffective coping, vulnerability to stress, poor adjustment, and negative affect (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Based on this association, the author suggested that greater stress reactivity in response to minor stressors might be a stable marker for vulnerability to stress and a predictor of negative outcomes. The study was limited in that it included only women, did not evaluate associations between stress reactivity and

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