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The stress process, self-efficacy expectations, and psychological health

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Abstract

In this study the effects of the stress process after a stressful encounter, that is an examination period, on university students' psychological health, as well as certain factors that play a significant role in this relationship are being examined. Two hundred and ninety-one (291) students at the University of Athens participated in our study. They completed a series of questionnaires concerning (a) psychological symptoms; (b) self-efficacy expectations; (c) threat, challenge and stakes; (d) coping strategies, and (e) a cognitive self-schema concerning personal examination abilities. The questionnaires were completed in three phases: three months and one week before an examination period, and one week after completion of this period. According to the findings, psychological symptoms are predicted by prior health, appraisal variables, and certain coping strategies. Self-efficacy expectations play a significant role in shaping threat, challenge, and stakes. These appraisal categories in turn exert influence upon psychological health, even after controlling for prior psychological health and coping strategies. Self-efficacy serves as the key variable in the appraisal process, as well as a mediator between inner cognitive structures and stress outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The diverse perspectives from which the subject of psychosocial stress is approached vary along a number of dimensions. Therefore, many models try to define stress and describe its components. According to Sarafino (1999), who borrows ideas from several sources, stress is the condition that

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results when person–environment transactions lead the individual to perceive a discrepancy between the environmental demands and the person's resources. Lazarus (1966, 1991, 1993) and his co-workers (Lazarus, Averill, & Opton, 1970; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b) focus on cognitive appraisal as a key variable, and especially as a mediator between stimuli and stress reactions.

Cognitive appraisal includes two processes, primary and secondary appraisal. In primary appraisal, a situation is judged as being irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful. Stressful appraisals conclude in three kinds of appraisal, namely, harm, threat, and challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b). Harm represents damage already done. Threat refers to the potential for harm and it is experienced when the person anticipates future harm or loss. Finally, challenge refers to the potential for gain even under difficult situations. Threat and challenge are anticipatory appraisals.

In secondary appraisal the person evaluates coping resources and options. The individual evaluates his/her competence, material or other resources in order to cope with the stressful situation. Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage (master, reduce, or tolerate) a troubled person–environment relationship (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). According to Folkman and Lazarus (1980) coping has two major functions: the regulation of distressing emotions (emotion focused coping) and the undertaking of action in order to change for the better the problem causing the distress (problem focused coping). Coping and cognitive appraisal are interdependent. Each part exerts influence and determines the other.

Cognitive appraisal depends on the nature of the stressful situation or the environment and also on inter-person factors (Kaplan, 1996). Such influences interact in shaping the mediating process of appraisal, which in turn influences the choice of coping activity. There are many potential situation factors that play a significant role in this process, such as imminence and degree of harm, ambiguity about the degree of harm or coping options, duration, frequency and chronicity of the stressful encounter, etc. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a, 1984b). On the other hand, a variety of personal resources also appear especially important as appraisal determinants and coping resources, including self-efficacy, optimism, hardiness, sense of coherence, locus of control, beliefs about self and environment, values, etc. (Holahan, Moos, & Schaefer, 1996).

The appraisal and coping process has also been examined with studies conducted between undergraduate students that were dealing with examination stress. According to Zeidner (1995a), the coping process in test situations includes both problem and emotion focused strategies. Even though there is no consensus regarding which are the most effective and adaptive strategies, it seems that emotion focused (e.g., denial and use of drugs) are significant predictors of anxiety and other negative outcomes, while, on the other hand, problem focused coping moderates academic hassles and facilitates performance (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Zeidner, 1994, 1995b). Cognitive appraisal and relevant factors are also of importance in evaluative situations. Zeidner (1994), for example, found that evaluation trait anxiety has a direct effect on anxiety during exams. Folkman and Lazarus (1985) found that, even controlling for grade received, appraisal and coping variables accounted for a large proportion of the variance in positive and negative emotions experienced by students. Rafferty, Smith, and Ptacek (1997) also argue that challenge appraisals are related to a 'facilitating' form of anxiety, which is adaptive, while threat or harm appraisals are connected to a 'debilitating' anxiety, which is related to avoidance and low performance.

In recent years more and more emphasis has been put on the role that self-efficacy expectations play in the appraisal and coping process. According to Bandura (1977, 1982, 1997), self-

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