

The Effects of Stress on College Students

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“Stress is the body’s reaction to any change that requires an adjustment or a response” (Clinic, 2015, p. 1). Stress is different for everyone; it comes down to how a person copes with stress and how intense the experience is for them. Stress can be positive or negative. It often turns negative when a person is faced with many challenges without a break between each stressor. When someone is stressed it can cause them to be unfocused, tired, or even physically ill. Long term stress can lead to a condition called distress which is a negative stress reaction. Distress will create greater problems that include depression, panic attacks and anxiety. Stress is also linked to six leading causes of death: heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide. When people try to cope with stress they often resort to compulsive behaviors or substance abuse (Clinic, 2015).

College students can experience negative effects of stress from the pressures of balancing coursework and life. Studies have shown that stress or stress related issues are growing among the college student population. There are many reasons that college students experience stress. Examples include: being on their own for the first time, handling social pressures to fit in, managing their academic work load, and dealing with daily life challenges.

This paper will discuss the impact that stress has on college students. It focuses on the effect stress has on a student’s academic success, coping with stress and the ways in which institutions are being proactive and helping students manage their stress.

Stress

There are three types of stress: acute stress, episodic acute stress, and chronic acute stress. Most people encounter acute stress, which can be positive or negative (Cohen, 2017). An example of positive acute stress would be the excitement before a roller coaster ride. An example

of negative acute stress would be someone getting into a car accident. Acute stress comes and goes and does not last for extended periods of times. Episodic acute stress occurs more frequently. This type of stress is accompanied by worry and angst and usually happens to people with “type A” personalities. People who experience episodic acute stress tend to stress about getting things done quickly to where they become overwhelmed. Chronic acute stress is when someone feels there is no end in sight and these emotions begin to wear the person down. This type of stress will affect the health of a person and can lead to heart problems, strokes, or potentially cancer. Chronic acute stress requires reaching out for help in order to manage it (Cohen, 2017).

Symptoms and Signs of Stress

It is important not only for a student to recognize when they have symptoms of stress but for administrators and faculty members to recognize a change in their student’s behavior. There are four primary symptoms of stress: physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral (Cohen, 2017). Individuals can experience symptoms from one or all categories. Physical symptoms include: disrupted digestion, twitching or shaking, headaches, nausea, trouble sleeping, unusual changes in weight, and heartburn. Emotional symptoms include: impatience, feeling of sadness, restlessness, irritability and loss of interest. Cognitive symptoms include: impaired concentration, trouble remembering homework or deadlines, chronic worrying, reduced judgement, impaired speech and unwanted thoughts. Behavioral symptoms include: change in sleep and eating habits, use of drugs, delay in completing daily responsibilities, change in school performance, social isolation, lying, and trouble getting along with peers (Cohen, 2017). Transitioning from a dependent student living at home with their parents to an independent college student can create a stressful environment. A student may start eating poorly which can

leads to less exercise, leading to poor sleep habits and then overall their academic performance may suffer (Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009).

Causes of College Stress

“College student mental health problems are becoming more common, more problematic and a much larger focus on college and university campuses. It is vital that all student affairs practitioners understand these concerns and what impact they have on the academic, social and psychological well-being of students.” (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011, pp. 400-401). College students have a lot to balance when they start school. Not only are they already coming in with their own personal struggles, now they are faced with a whole new environment. The first few weeks can be a stressful time as the students get used to a new place to live. This new environment comes with new food, new people and a different kind of support system. It can be a tough adjustment period for many people.

There is so much that college students have to face prior to attending. They are confronted academically, financially and with preparing for their future. Academic demands and test anxiety are a common long-term cause of stress for college students. Students go to college to succeed and the pressures of getting good grades are constantly hanging over them. The symptoms can be both physical and mental and can play a significant role in their ability to perform. Finances play a role in stress, many students are on their own for the first time and learning how to pay for food, gas, rent, and entertainment. Even those students who are supported by scholarships or loans have the stress of keeping up with the standards of the scholarship and making sure their loans are secure. Lastly, post-graduate plans and the fear of the unknown is a factor in the stresses of college students. They have to prepare for the workforce, land a job and then figure out how to pay for their loans (Cohen, 2017).

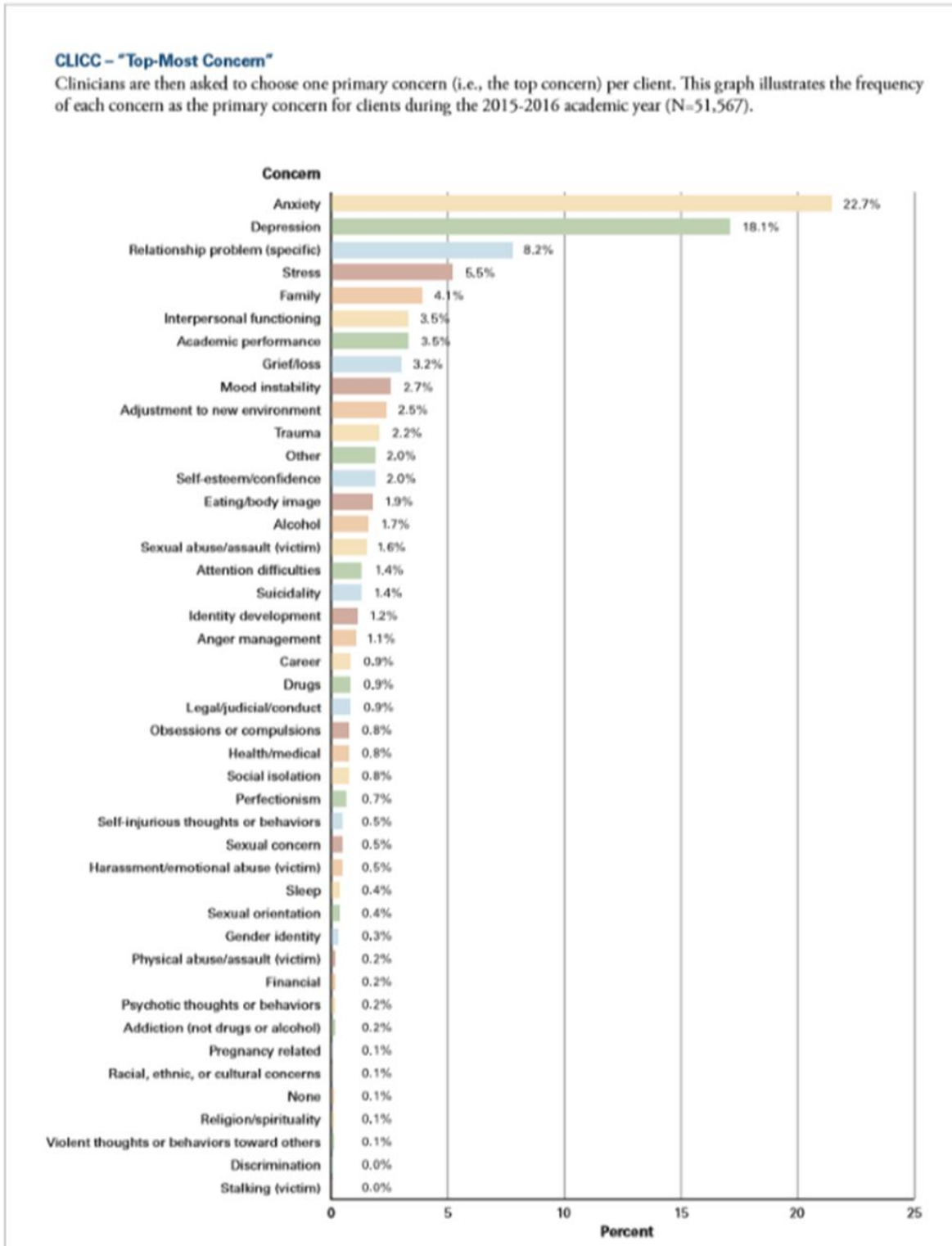
Data

According to the American College Health Association Spring 2016 National College Health Assessment, 23% of students reported anxiety and 32% of students reported stress as factors that hindered their academic performance. Both anxiety and stress were the highest factors, while depression at 15% and sleep at 21% were other factors that stood out in the report, both being related to stress and anxiety (Association, 2016).

Four-year State University

The following data and graph were retrieved from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), 2016 Annual Report. This information is based on students who used the University's health resources in the 2015-2016 academic year. Figure 1 lists the leading concerns given by students at Penn State. Anxiety at 22.7% and Depression at 18.1% were the two main reasons students chose as their primary concern. Stress was five and a half percent of the concerns; however, anxiety and depression have a direct relation to stress (Health, 2017).

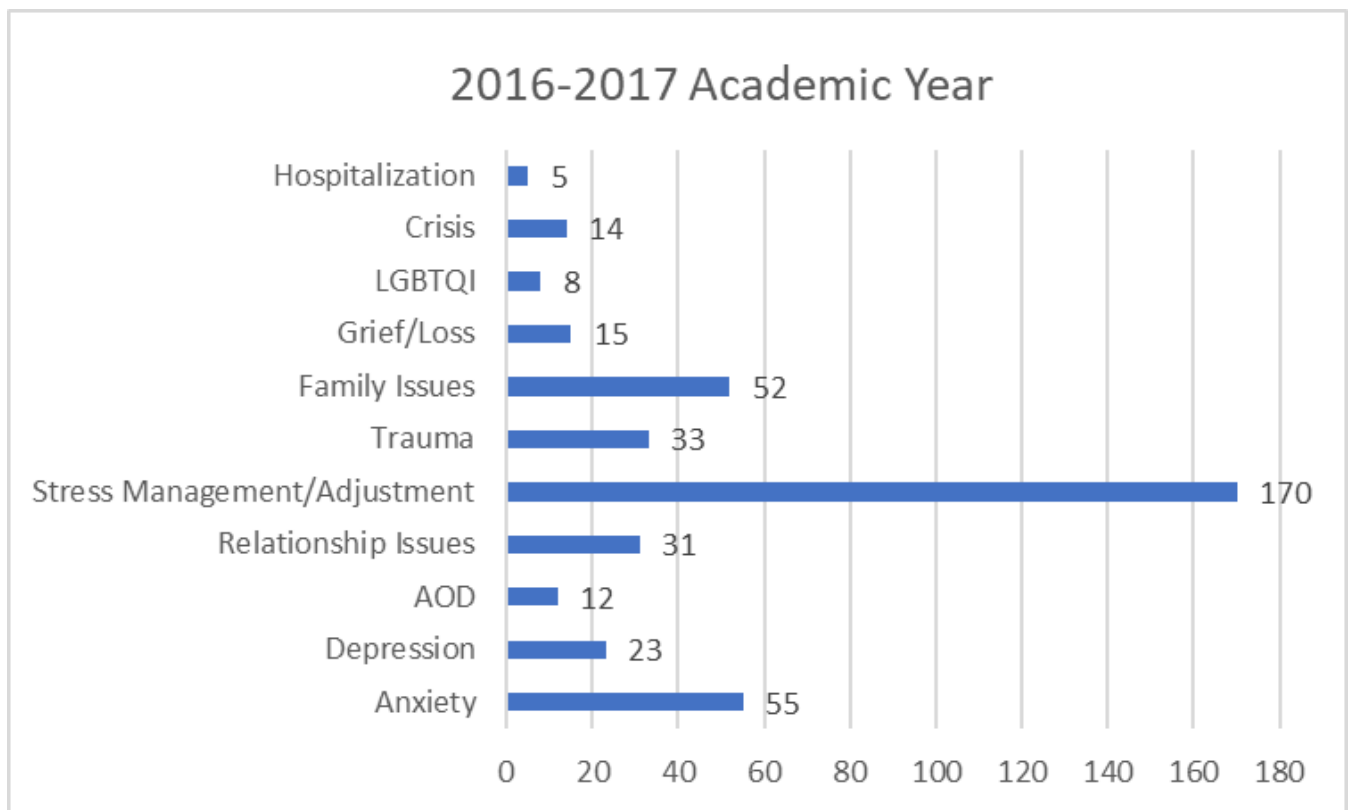
Figure 1



Two-year Private Technical Institution

These data were retrieved from Johnson College of Technology, Scranton, PA, and includes weekly tracking by the Counselor/Manager of Disability Services. Figure 2 is an overview of the reasons students made appointments with the counselor. There were 418 sessions in the 2016-2017 academic year. This information provides the main reason the student per session was seeking counseling. Stress and anxiety were the two highest reasons students were visiting the counseling office making up 54%.

Figure 2



To further explore any trends with students using counseling and disability services, Emily Holmes, Counselor/Manager of Disability Services at Johnson College, was interviewed. She identified key areas of stress that are common among Johnson College students. In the fall

semester, the biggest stress on the students was to make friends. Many students disclosed in their sessions that they want to make friends and socialize but they do not know how to. In the spring semester, the students were mainly stressed about test taking and the effect it would have on their grade and ability to graduate. In addition, stress from their home life played a role in their ability to focus.

Throughout the year a major trend was struggle with self-advocacy skills. The students felt too anxious to speak to their instructors about their grades or concerns they had in the course. They thought the instructors were approachable but anxiety would take over and students would not feel confident in communicating their needs with the instructors.

Academic Success

The health and well-being of a student directly effects their academic success. If a student is suffering from stress, they are likely unable to focus on their academics. Although stress can be managed, it is hard for a person to take control of it in higher times of stress, such as, exams, papers and major projects. Time management and classroom design can significantly change the way a student is feeling.

Time Management

When students stress about their academics, from studying for an exam to meeting deadlines, the majority of the stress can be resolved through proper time management skills. Students tend to procrastinate and it ends up causing distress before an exam or assignment due date. A study done on college students academic stress and its relations to time management suggests, "A person engaging more frequently in time management behaviors will report fewer physical and psychological symptoms of stress. The greater satisfaction with leisure that students indicate, the lower their perceived academic stress will be." (Misra & Michelle McKean , 2000,

p. 2). If students broke down their work into small blocks of time they would feel less stress and pressure closer to the deadline. The study found that time management had a greater effect on academic stress than leisure satisfaction. There was a major correlation between time management and academic stress, students had lower levels of stress when they felt that they had control of the situation (Misra & Michelle McKean , 2000).

Teaching Methods

Helping students cope with stress is not always left to the counseling or student activities departments. Instructors can include ways for students to experience less stress through course design. For example, instructors can stagger due dates for course assignments in the syllabus. In the beginning of the semester instructors can use low stake assignments to help identify students early on who may need extra help. For assignments that are course-long or projects, it is helpful to have “check-ins” or to cancel a classroom session to meet one-on-one with students. When grading, instructors should provide a rubric prior to giving the assignment and once graded provide meaningful feedback before the next assignment (Harbin, 2015). To help students learn from their mistakes, instructors can post answer keys after the assignment is returned. During midterms and finals week, it is important to hold review sessions, extra office hours or establish work groups and encourage student collaboration (Harbin, 2015). Effective time management can lower academic stress. Counselors and faculty members should emphasize participation in time management seminars or activities. Many times these seminars are only forced on to students who have known academic problems but should be utilized by all students (Misra & Michelle McKean , 2000).

Personal Coping Methods

If a student does not want to seek help, is not comfortable discussing their mental struggles, or simply feels they do not have time, they can cope with stress on their own. Stressing about stress can make a student feel more on edge. If they identify the problem, admit that it is a problem and take action, they may end up solving the problem rather than creating a whole new stressful situation. Sleep and nutrition are key to reducing stress. Sleep allows your body and mind to re-balance. A well-balanced diet will keep the mind focused and the body energized. Exercise is essential to reducing stress, it does not have to be a long period of time, it can be a 30-min walk while listening to music to relax (Lucier, 2017). Taking a break for a few minutes from studying or working on a paper can reduce stress. It is important to make sure this time is spent in a quiet area with no cell phone or distractions, allowing the person to take a few breaths and re-focus. If someone has been working on something non-stop, a longer, more social break might be needed. A student should take time and go see a movie or out with friends for a few hours. Releasing the tension and focusing on something else for a little while will help a student start fresh once they return to their work (Lucier, 2017). All students feel stress at some point and they can rely on each other for help. If students do not feel they need professional help, it can be relieving to be able to vent to one of their friends or a group of friends all struggling with the stress of college (Lucier, 2017). Overall, a college student can help themselves through times of stress. However, they need to remember to stay focused on academics because there are a lot of different opportunities to get involved in clubs and organizations, which can then overwhelm a student, potentially sending them down a path of long-term stress leading to anxiety or depression.

Reducing Stress Among Students

There are multiple stress reducing techniques higher education professionals can incorporate into student programming or in the classroom. From personal experience as an instructor, the campus environment and first year seminar programs are a great place to start. Some institutions have established programs that are available year-round. Other institutions offer unique ways to reduce stress during mid-term or finals week.

Campus Environment

To create an environment that is proactive in relieving stress, students should be provided support through the enrollment process. This can be done by streamlining enrollment paperwork to be as simple and organized as possible. Financial Aid departments can play a large role in meeting the students from the beginning and providing personal assistance with filling out the FAFSA or set up workshops on coming up with the best financial plan. If there are campus ambassadors or student mentors they can be part of the experience and reach out to the students, welcoming them to campus. If a student is given the proper treatment in the beginning, they may feel more successful going into their college career.

Once school is in session the student engagement and counseling offices can work together in creating programming on stress management. A way to support students are through wellness workshops that include not only managing stress and anxiety but balancing work and home life, budgeting, studying and test taking skills, or any other areas that can cause stress. If an institution does not have the resources to create workshops, passive messaging on campus that is educational and positive can reach the student who may just be having a bad day. There are so many avenues that an institution can take that will make a big difference in the student experience.

First-Year Transition

As is well-known among student affairs professionals, the first year is the most stressful time for students. The transition into college is the ideal time for an institution to be involved making the student feel validated, confident and accepted. There are multiple reasons a student will feel stress starting school. Feeling overwhelmed is a common reason. Working one-on-one with students who have social anxiety and refused to work on group projects is one way to encourage them to come to class. Some students have families and full-time jobs and struggle to get a proper amount of sleep. Other students suffer from depression, making every day a challenge to get through. Less severe forms of life stress are experienced by students who are not the best test takers and will get overwhelmed or discouraged when midterms and finals come around. The point of these examples is that an institution should create an environment from the first day that helps students manage their personal struggles.

First year seminars or transitional programs are a great place to include lessons or sessions on stress management. Sessions that also relate to work/life balance, budgeting, nutrition, sleep, etc. which are all triggers of stress can help a student be proactive in combating stress. The University of Wisconsin-Madison has an entire center, through their student life department, dedicated to the first-year experience. In this center they have staff members and students who organize orientation, transfer transition programs and other support programs. There are peer leaders specialized to assist first-year students, tutoring, academic advising, and family support (Center for the first-year experience , 2017).

Established Programs

Institutions have established programs to help students with their stress. With the overcrowding in the counseling offices on college campuses, the University of Central Florida

started to use an anxiety app so that students can use their phone and go through a seven-module cognitive behavioral program that offers brief videoconferences with a therapist (Hoffman, 2015). The California State University uses a program called Biofeedback to help their students manage stress and anxiety. This method of treatment helps individuals learn how to control physiological processes such as muscle tension, blood pressure, breathing, heart rate, brain wave stress, and skin temperature. Through the process students become aware of their anxiety and stress based on the symptoms they are feeling (Ratanasiripong, Sverduk, Hayashino, & Prince, 2009). The California State University also provides wellness programs, student retention programs, health education, and other mentoring and tutoring services to help prevent the amount of anxiety a student might feel. Belmont University in Tennessee, has a program called GPS (Growth & Purpose for Students). This program provides students the tools for academic planning and helps them navigate their way through college. A student can utilize the program for help in deciding their major and help in mapping their four-year academic plan. The program offers career coaching as well as academic coaching, which provides a recovery plan for students with poor performance. There is also a series of sessions available to the students to help them de-stress and prepare for college no matter what stage in their college career they are in (University, 2017).

Out of the Box Programs

Whether a student is coping with stress daily or just during peak times, everyone can feel the tension during finals week. Fun ways colleges can help students destress are described in a USA Today College article titled, *How 6 colleges help students cope with finals stress*. The following are example of special techniques that colleges help their students during finals: (1) At New York University the campus health center will hand out goodie bags as motivational gifts.

These bags are filled with chocolate and stress balls as a way to show support during midterms and final exams. (2) A secret group of people at Brown University will help undergraduates get through study sessions by handing out doughnuts in the nude. This decade old tradition is condoned by the university each semester. (3) Cram Jam is a special event held at Tulane University where dining halls are open late at night and provide food, music and a ton of fun. (4) The University of Georgia does not limit their relaxation efforts to only the end of the semesters. They provide options to de-stress throughout the year in the library through sponsored relaxation tables. These tables provide ways to reduce stress and relieve anxiety. The themes include coloring, puzzles, and free coffee. (5) Arizona State University likes to include parents as a way to help students during finals week. They invite parents to make their kids homemade smoothies at their annual event “Smoothie Saturday.” (6) Study breaks are a great way to reduce stress, the University of Southern California does just that. Every night before final exams the marching band will play the University’s fight song outside the 24-hour library. The primal scream in the song allows students to let off steam and keeps them motivated to study (Goodstein, 2015).

Conclusion

Stress effects people in different ways. College is a time in life when a person is faced with a new beginning, more responsibilities and a challenge to set the rest of their life up for success. To some, college is a time of sacrifice to have a better outcome, to others it is the next step in their life after high school. No matter what path someone is on, they are bringing the problems they already have and adding to it with the pressure of adjusting to campus, meeting new people, getting involved, studying, taking exams and trying to finance and balance it all.

Institutions need to continue to build programs and create goals in every department on campus to have an environment that will recognize this issue. Knowing that stress plays a factor

in academic achievement, it is important that educators recognize key signs in their students. If a student is acting out of the norm, always physically ill or disconnected, it is time to step in and help. Ultimately, it is the student's responsibility to take care of their mental and physical state but it is the staff and faculty at an institution to care and recognize when someone is struggling.

Stress is a common problem among many people. No matter what level of stress someone is facing it is not ever going to go away. It can only be managed through coping skills. If a student is able to learn to manage their levels of stress during college, they will be set up to handle stressful situations that happen in the future. It is unfortunate that stress levels can lead to depression and other ailments but institutions that recognize the importance of stress management will have more successful students.

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