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Final Paper

May 8, 2020

School, Stress, and Mental Health

While each diagnosis in psychopathology contained a particular intrigue, there was something especially fascinating in an overarching component: stress. In some instances stress could be a contributor to acquiring a certain mental illness which include, but are not limited to, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Acute Stress Disorder, and Adjustment Disorder. Furthermore, “the relationship between stress and psychopathology is considered so important that the role of stress is recognized in diagnostic formulations” (Hooley, Nick, Butcher, 2020). As college students, school can be a large contributor of overall stressors (as it can be for all levels of education). In the Childhood Disorders lecture, a graph from Comer and Comer’s 2019 book, *Fundamentals of Abnormal Psychology* illustrates that, among areas of childhood stress, both child and parent respondents rank school performance highest when asked about if and in which areas the child experiences stress. Echoing this, in an article by NPR that presents two findings is the discovery that “almost 40 percent of parents say their high-schooler is experiencing a lot of stress from school, according to a new NPR poll conducted with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health” and that “A survey by the American Psychological Association found that nearly half of all teens — 45 percent — said they were stressed by school pressures.” While it is true that some stress is needed for positive performance, these sources reveal just the top layer of detriments that excessive amounts of

stress can have on students. For this reason, the duration of the paper will examine the interplay of stress, school, and mental illness.

First it is important to note what stress is. In accordance with Hooley, Nick, and Butcher's 2020 book once again, the following definitions will be applied "to external demands as stressors, to the effects they create within the organism as stress, and to the efforts to deal with stress as coping strategies. It is also important to note that stress is fundamentally an interactive and dynamic construct because it reflects the interaction between the organism and the environment over time (Monroe, 2008)." Stress can be considered a part of life that all (or nearly all) people experience in their lifetimes, but there is an especially vast area of research on the interaction between stress and school. A longitudinal study of honors psychology students in an Australian study by Cruwys, Greenaway, and Haslam found, "At the time of submission, honours students experienced high levels of psychological distress and low wellbeing relative to student norms, with 49% scoring in the clinical range for depression. Higher-achieving students had the lowest wellbeing at the time of submission. Wellbeing had improved substantially 1 month later, except among students who received a disappointing grade." This example points out in particular the direct connection between school, stress, and mental health and illustrates how this may persist for those who do not obtain the outcome they had hoped for. While this study looked at honors psychology students, there are others which point out a similar trend more broadly amongst students, looking this time at boys and girls. Giota & Gustafsson's journal article, "Perceived Demands of Schooling, Stress, and Mental Health: Changes from Grade 6 to Grade 9 as a Function of Gender and Cognitive Ability," found that "there is a need to develop interventions for minimizing the consequences of stress among adolescents and modify those particular aspects of academic demands which cause stress and poor mental health, especially

among girls.” This source especially points out how school stressors grow with time, even though both of these age groups (and the good majority of those seeking education) are still so neurologically vulnerable. Conner & Pope’s article, “Not Just Robo-Students: Why Full Engagement Matters and How Schools Can Promote It” takes this a step further in questioning whether all the stress is really *helping* the students to learn. “Research has long linked academic engagement to positive social, psychological, and physical developmental outcomes; however, qualitative studies in high-performing schools find that some students who work hard in school may be compromising their mental and physical health in the pursuit of top grades” and discovered that “although most students report working hard, few enjoy their schoolwork and find it valuable. This lack of full engagement, particularly the absence of affective and cognitive engagement, is associated with more frequent school stress, higher rates of cheating, and greater internalizing, externalizing, and physical symptoms of stress.” This article points out the important distinction between academic achievement and actually integrating material meaningfully in one’s life. Even around Gonzaga University's campus, it is not uncommon to hear of people who managed to get a good grade in a class where they feel they learned nothing or that they got a good grade on a paper that they “bs-ed”.

This topic has become even more pertinent in light of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It quickly became apparent that navigating this as a college student would be filled with an assortment of challenges. As the sister of a college professor, correspondence has consisted of stories from a number of her advisees as to the multiple challenges they are facing in addition to trying to keep up with their course work including, but not limited to, lack of Internet access, taking on care-giving roles, and financial hardship. On top of these additional stressors, school itself may contribute even more than it previously had. During the transition to online

courses, curiosity was sparked so correspondingly an informal poll was drafted on a private, personal Instagram story. It asked, “I’m curious. How has your school work load changed since moving to online courses.” The options were given to pick “More Work” or “Same/Less Work.” There is an unfortunate limitation in that Instagram polls only allow for two options, but overall this did not diminish the results. After twenty-four hours the poll had received 228 views and 76 responses. There were 49 votes for “More Work” (64%) and 27 votes for “Same/Less Work” (36%). The respondents consisted predominantly of high school and college students from institutions in the western half of the United States. While this poll was not replicated, it does pose some key questions about the response of institutions during this time, especially when taken into account the aforementioned information conducted under “normal” (and arguably less stressful) circumstances. As a final personal observation, different educational institutions chose to amend their policies in a variety of ways to accommodate the added complexity of the semester. Gonzaga University took somewhat of a middle ground in a university wide email first written on April 1st, 2020 and again reiterated on May 7, 2020. In short, a grade of pass/fail can be applied to courses, but it only “counts” for elective credits, so if it is applied to courses originally intended to meet core requirements or a person’s major/minor they will have to take another course to meet the requirement or even take the same class again. It should be noted that this is not a simple problem to solve as it has long-term implications for a student’s academic and professional lives. Still, in linking this current situation with other sources, perhaps a bit ironically for a final course assignment, the urge to consider this relationship in looking back at this time in the future cannot be overstated.

All in all, stress, school, and mental health is a topic that applies to students all around the world as the aforementioned studies have shown. Together, they beg the question of how to

create a motivated learning atmosphere without risking overloading the student with stressors that sometimes result in detrimental influences to their mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic pushes the envelope further in asking where the line between the importance of academic achievement and overall mental health and well-being lies. The research has and will continue to provide answers to these questions, but it will be up to society and educational institutions to decide what they will implement.

References

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