Positively Stressed!: An Approach to Encouraging a Healthy Stress Mindset and Strengthening Positive Coping Mechanisms

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Abstract

Stress management has been a popular topic in the public discourse with many looking for ways to *reduce* stress. Recently, a new method, involving the change in our attitudes towards stress and the recognition of stress as a key factor in a healthy lifestyle has gained some recognition among research communities. An interpersonal group was conducted over 4 months to assess participants' willingness to adopt new ideas about the importance and usefulness of stress. This research found that societal norms and past experiences of the group led to hostile views on stress, and it was attributed to having a harmful impact on one's health. It was also found that interpersonal group processing of these notions could be changed, and the participants were willing to try different coping strategies and engage with the latest studies on stress.

Keywords: *Positive Stress, Stress, Coping Strategies, Interpersonal Group, Attitudes Towards Stress, Healthy Stress Mindset*

Table of Contents

Introduction

We have all felt positively stressed at one point or another. But have we ever felt positively about the stress we feel? In other words, does how we think about stress change the impact it has on our health outcomes? This research aims to identify how an interpersonal process group of undergraduate students can use modern stress research to reframe the negative associations we typically associate with the feeling. It also seeks to identify if emerging adults, people between the ages of 18 and 29 that neither feel as a child nor an adult, to change their views on stress to attain more positive associations with the topic. We will go over the current stigma against stress, the new approaches studies have found to utilize stress to our benefit, and the application of these approaches in a group therapy setting.

According to a 2023 Gallup poll, 66% of college students report feeling stress on any given day. The poll also found that female students were more likely to experience negative emotions including stress. Another study found that, "academic-related stress can reduce academic achievement, decrease motivation and increase the risk of school dropout" (Pascoe 2019). Our study aimed to not change the percentage of students feeling stressed, but to

transform the view of stress as a negative to a positive. This will spark better health outcomes for students experiencing stress and decrease the negative impact of stress.

This study aimed to facilitate group discussion centering around stress and coping skills for stress. Specifically, how the way one views stress affects the impact that stress has on them. Because stress is a bodily response to stimuli, research has shown that there are many benefits that come from the body's stress response (McConigal 2015). The study also measures the effectiveness of interpersonal group processing in achieving these goals.

The benefit of this study is to change attitudes regarding stress for all populations, but more specifically for young adults facing major life stressors such as entering the working world, finding a place to live, and the pressures of starting a family. Having the inability to develop positive stress coping mechanisms will lead to a negative mental state (Meerloo 1958). This will lead to a decreased quality of life. Furthermore, participants expressed an interest in our topic, meaning that at least some college students want to better their relationship with stress voluntarily.

We used cooperative inquiry as our theoretical framework. Cooperative inquiry involves finding a group of people with a similar mindset, and then creating new ideas and discussion based on this interest. This process involved group participatory research. We used a small, non-hierarchical group as the mode to collect our data. The participants were able to express interest in our topic and change the topic to better suit their needs. Everyone in the group contributed to the ideas, activities, and conclusion of the inquiry.

Literature Review

Females in the undergraduate level were more likely to be stressed at the end of their semester than males, according to Graves et., al in their 2021. *Gender differences in perceived stress and coping among college students* article. Coping skills, gender, and stress were all determining factors in how undergraduate students coped with stress. Females also had more emotion-based coping, as well as more coping skills in general. An understanding of where further research is needed to be developed is established through the article.

Gandhe's *Positive stress: Review of relevant theories and an alternate conceptualization* discusses stress management; in particular, how positive stress affects a person physically and mentally. The results suggest that stress is always changing, and therefore cannot be accurately explained through empirical tests and results. There are many different responses to stress. While stress itself goes through cycles during an individual's lifetime, further empirical testing and understandings is needed to determine appropriate views of positive stress and the paths needed to reach it.

Meerlo, in his journal article *Morale in Our Society*, finds that having goals to look forward to help with attitudes towards facing uncertain and unwanted stress. Faith, acceptance, and a want to keep going are valuable resources to achieve these wants. A group of people that a person can rely on will bring about positive thoughts and feelings about the world and challenge the static moral into an idea that shifts far beyond a person's first beliefs. This brings confidence and determination to make life better for both the person, as well as the people they care about.

Ickeson et. al all had the same objective of determining if leaders of interpersonal groups that had more self-confidence and efficacy would have a positive correlation with successful groups. The results from their article *Leaders in times of transition: Virtual self-efficacy, participant behaviors, and leader perceptions of adaptive interpersonal group processe*s found that self-efficacy in group I critical to successful group facilitation, and from both a personal and virtual standpoint, members would not have as many positive effects from the therapy should the

leaders not demonstrate confidence and sustainability in their roles. Otherwise, negative perceptions of group facilitation may be formed by former and future group participants.

Research Methodology

Our group got together once a week on Fridays from 1:00pm-1:50pm. We would typically meet in a classroom on Thiel College property, though there were a few times we went elsewhere for a group session. Participants voluntarily chose facilitators from a selection of topics the facilitators wished to discuss. Group sessions would consist of participants and facilitators goal setting and working together to achieve these goals. Each session would typically end with a "what-went-well" activity where individuals in the group would discuss one good thing that happened in the past week or that they were looking forward to in order to transition out of sessions. Other than that, sessions were fluid and did not have a structure set by facilitators as participants were encouraged to work with one another rather than be worked on by us during this research. Because of this, most sessions operated in a cooperative mode. Transcripts were recorded and transcribed after each session and analyzed for common themes that we used in our research.

This qualitative research took place every Friday from 1:00pm-1:50pm in the Spring semester of 2024 in a classroom within a Thiel College classroom in Greenville, Pennsylvania. Both participants of group were female students that attend Thiel College as full-time students. The participants were emerging adults between the ages 18 to 22 enrolled in the PSY 161: Interpersonal Processes class, facilitated by three facilitators enrolled in PSY 381: Research with Human Participants.

Heron's research method involving cooperative inquiry assumes that there are three main modes of facilitation; the hierarchical mode, co-operative mode, and autonomous mode. It is assumed that for sessions to be the most beneficial, the autonomous mode which allows participants to be in control is best, and the hierarchical mode, where the facilitators assert control over the group is not as beneficial.   Also, there are 6 dimensions or stages of facilitating using Heron's research method. It is assumed that each of these stages can use a different mode to approach their conclusion. For each stage, we aimed at the minimum to use the co-operative mode, because group sessions only last for several weeks, it would be difficult to build the trust and rapport to achieve the autonomous mode.

During group meetings, each of the moderators let the session begin by welcoming the group members. They opened the floor to anything the subjects wanted to discuss. If there was something to be discussed, the lesson was incorporated into what the current topic matter was. If the subjects did not want to talk, the lesson was introduced, and participants were asked to incorporate these ideas into their everyday lives.

No materials or money were needed during the sessions.

Definition of Key Terms

Positive Stress: "positive stress is that stress, which keeps one moving on "positive stress path," resultantly one rejuvenates cycle after cycle of life-stress with new resources gained, to achieve better results in life" (Gandhe 2014).

 Stress, Coping Strategies: "defined coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal situations deemed to exceed or overwhelm the individual's resources" (Mayordomo-Rodriguez et., al 2015).

Interpersonal Group: "interpersonal group processes reflect broader ongoing processes at the group-as-a-whole level (Burlingame & Jensen, 2017)" (Icekson et al. 2024)

Attitudes Towards Stress: "One of man's most dangerously passive attitudes toward stress and challenge is his mental surrender before the battle is fought. Such inadvertent self-betrayal through the fear of facing danger-is easily proved in individual neuroses" (Meerloo 1958)
Healthy Stress Mindset (healthy mindset): "Feeling optimistic usually means that an individual feels in control of a particular situation and therefore experiences more stress than distress. An optimistic mindset is reflected by the statement, "I expect the best" (Geller 2020).

Data Analysis

Research Questions
-How can a cooperative inquiry design be used to facilitate discussion on stress?
-Are undergraduate students willing to change their views on stress to be more positive?

The facilitators theorized that group therapy would be an effective way of transforming group thoughts on stress and encouraging a more positive stress mindset.
Data Collection

After every session, a transcription process took place. This typically happened the weekend following each session and took several hours per session. After the sessions were transcribed, key terms, constructs, and coping skills were written down and described. The constructs are group work, verbal communication, preventative skills, self-worth, diversions, and support system(s). Each of the following was discussed at length at one point and was determined to provide benefit for short and long-term reflections and positive mindset differentiation.

During the first group session, a confidentiality waiver was given and filled out by all participants of the study. It explained that none of the participants had any right to discuss what happened in the group outside of the group, and that while attendance was not mandatory, it was highly suggested to promote healthy coping skills. There was not any break in confidentiality during the duration of group sessions, nor were there any absences that raised a cause for concern.

Construct	Definition	Is (behaviors)	Is Not	Positive/Negative
Group-work	Ability to perform in a group setting	Actions performed in group	Actions performed alone	Being able to communicate and work effectively (+) Feeling overwhelmed and unable to work (-)
Communication (verbal)	Passing on information to others	Verbal	Written	Talking to a person(+) Not talking to a person (-), writing things down
Preventative skills	Taking actions to positively cope with an event	Positive verbal/positive action	Harmful behaviors to self and others	Deep breathing (+) Drinking alcohol (-)

Self-Worth	Measure of one's success	Feelings towards self	Feelings towards others	Having intrinsic feelings of worth (+) Depending on others to measure worth (-) Using grades as a measure of worth (-)
Diversions	Avoiding the situation by focusing on something else	actions	Intrinsically harmful	Playing videogames to express the frustration another situation gives the person (+) Pressing down emotions by refusing to feel them (-)
Support System	Friends/Family/overall social environment that supports the individual	People who know you	Strangers	Feelings of comfort and openness derived from system (+) Feelings of close mindedness and unapproachability from system (-)

The figure above is the construct chart used to assess behaviors in the group. The constructs presented showcase the themes of the study which used to dictate whether positive stress is utilized and beneficial to the participants. The chart itself is utilized to determine the construct, its definition, what behaviors may result in the construct, and both the positive and negative behaviors of the constructs. We found both positive and negative behaviors being presented when analyzing the transcripts. We found that as the sessions continued, there were more positive constructs and behaviors exhibited by the participants as the session progressed. Constructs such as group-work, communication, and preventative skills were discussed within the group setting and applied to circumstances in their everyday lives. Diversions were decreased because of the increase of support systems and self-worth regulated within group sessions. Each has a specific role within the idea of promoting positive stress. While some constructs are originally construed as negative aspects, understanding positive coping skills increases cognizance of a need for stress and how to use it to one's benefit.

Themes Found

Major themes we found during this research included **past problems** playing a critical role in how participants dealt with stressors in their environment. One such example of this is when one

participant said, "I would live on a farm at one point the wind took one of the animal shelters that caused me kind of like PTSD to it. So now I get stressed whenever there's like high force winds that you can hear so when you have like," (W. 5, p. 15, l. 414-6). **Physical symptoms** were another common theme related to our stress topic. Participants would talk of how stressors physically made them ill or interrupted sleep patterns. It would also cause them to withdraw from social scenarios. In how to deal with stress, participants often used **diversions** and would avoid stressful situations by listening to music or watching television. A more positive theme was using **friends as a coping strategy**. One participant mentioned, "they [a friend] also gonna have stress but we're gonna have stress together," (Week 1, p.4, line 125). **Self-deprecation** and **procrastination** were negative behaviors discussed in group and were found to be a common theme throughout sessions that we worked on. Other themes included the discussion of **fears** related to processing emotions and **learning from experiencing**.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings of this study explore the steps and process needed for teaching emerging adults the benefits of utilizing positive stress in their lives. It could also be spread to all age groups, as all people in any walk of life experience stress at one point or another. Thinking of stress as a positive emotion rather than finding it negative could connect to a higher level of coping and reduced stress.

Findings from this research will aid in the process of positive stress research not only from emerging and young adulthood, but people from all ages and walks of life.

This research will add to the already developing research of positive stress and hopefully aid in an outreach of more individuals and their understanding of the topic. Learned lessons and skills will be taken to improve a person's life through lived and learned experience.

For all the data collected during the semester, the methods of general observation and behavioral coding were the most used and analyzed. Each session held a basic idea of a lesson or discussion, and each participant detailed their week's experience through discussion. The participants believed that they were utilizing the tools developed in-session and expanding that to their everyday life.

From the facilitator's observations, it was observed that both participants found use through their discussions. They shared difficulties and hardships they had experienced both past and present, and by the end of the study they discussed the skills they had learned and developed during group meetings. Another point of observation was that both participants' body language showcased less stress than when the semester started. This may be because the participants felt comfortable around the facilitators, yet the positive stress and appropriate resolutions to it also played a significant role.

The group participated in cooperative inquiry for all nine sessions throughout the semester. Cooperative inquiry meant the facilitators worked with all the group members to determine what they thought was best for them for the session, even if this was not what the facilitators had planned for the session. Instead of the facilitators leading the session, the participants had a say and steered the direction of the conversation a majority of the time. These sessions also utilized co-operative inquiry, as multiple times during the semester the facilitators attempted to let the participants guide where the session would lead. The facilitators would start the session by letting the participants decide what they wanted to discuss that day. Usually, the participants said their piece or waited for the facilitators to introduce the lessons or key discussion points or a group where the facilitators mainly led and directed sessions. When the

participants were discussing, they tried to include the facilitators in their discussion and wanted to know their thoughts and/or actions regarding a certain positive coping skill.

This research's findings established a positive correlation between learning about positive stress and the improvement of moods and life of the participants. Both mentioned that they try to use these skills consistently out of group sessions, and that they would like to attempt to continue to do so for the remainder of their lives. The study could only take place over sixteen weeks within the specified timeframe. We only had access to two participants both of which were female. In total, the group only contained five students all around the same age (18-22). Transcription writing was difficult and not always accurate due to recording device errors. We also could not monitor behavior of participants outside of group to measure effects of sessions. Finally, having 3 facilitators led to a variety of approaches during session and increased variability. A future direction this research could take includes further explanation and exploration of positive stress, and how to make its accompanying coping skills a habit that replaces negative outlooks on life.

The impact of this group therapy enabled participants to learn about how stress can be used to develop positive coping tools. Each person, moderator or otherwise, found that their stress was decreased using the techniques described within each session. Preventative skills and support systems, two of the major themes from the sessions, gave a thorough understanding as to why some stress is good for social situations and overall productivity. While the change was not immediately noticed, by the end of the sixteen weeks both participants confirmed that they were attempting to think of stress as positive in some instances and were also reporting an increase in life enjoyment. It was found that participants who had some control over group sessions found more control in their own lives. Overall, cooperative inquiry was a practical tool for helping others determine that there are positives of feeling stress, as well as understanding how it could contribute to helpful outcomes if utilized correctly.

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