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**The Impact of Interpersonal Stress in Romantic Relationships on College
Students' Mental Health and Academic Performance**

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**The Impact of Interpersonal Stress in Romantic Relationships on
College Students' Mental Health and Academic Performance**

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Abstract

The Impact of Interpersonal Stress in Romantic Relationships on College Students' Mental Health and Academic Performance

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Problems in relationships are one of the leading reasons for why college students seek counseling at university mental health centers (Green, Lowry, & Kopta, 2003). Interpersonal stress has been linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety, more problems with substance use, and higher suicidal ideation (Simon & Barrett, 2010; Drum, Brownson, Burton Denmark, & Smith, 2009). Research suggests that interpersonal stress experienced in romantic relationships has a more severe impact on well-being than stress experienced in any other relationship. Stress in general has been linked to impaired memory, lack of ability to focus and concentrate, lack of motivation, and lower retention rates in school (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011; Linn & Zeppa, 1984). Due to the pervasive nature of interpersonal problems, there is a need for proper implementation of intervention and services on college campuses to properly support college students. This report examines the effects of interpersonal stress, and more specifically romantic stress, on college students' well being and academic performance, as well as details possible counseling implications.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

College is well acknowledged to be a high stress environment (Pierceall & Keim, 2007; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Gall, Evans, & Bellerose, 2000). Researchers have suggested that because of the developmental transition from adolescence to adulthood, college students are particularly vulnerable to stress (Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009). With the transition from high school to college/university, students are often adjusting to living away from their parents for the first time, higher academic standards than they are accustomed to, handling finances independently, and a new social life (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). Additionally, there is pressure to decide future occupations and establish future life goals (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007; Killam, 2014). Overall, there is a transition from dependency on parents to self-sufficiency (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007).

Not only must students deal with issues that are directly related to being in the college environment such as, making difficult decisions about careers and future pathways, maintaining high grades, developing new relationships, exposure to risky behaviors like binge drinking, engaging in drugs, and unprotected sex, and learning how to balance social life and work, but students also deal with issues that are not directly related to college (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003). These issues can range

from conflicts with family, relationship problems, legal difficulties, and death of loved ones (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003).

Previous research has shown that college students' stress stems from academics, social relationships, finances, daily hassles, and familial relationships (Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009). Stress has been associated with poorer academic performance and retention in college students (Radcliffe, Stevenson, Lumley, D'Souza, & Kraft, 2010). Stressful life experiences and the emotional responses to those experiences may impair academic performance by interfering with cognitive processes, such as concentration and focus.

One of the proposed goals of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood is forming relationships (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). College is often a time when individuals are forming new relationships, pursuing serious romantic relationships, and even thinking about finding life partners. Relationship problems have been cited as the number three reason for why college-aged students seek mental health counseling (Green, Lowry, & Kopta, 2003; Cairns, Massfeller, & Deeth, 2010; Barr, Krylowicz, Reetz, Mistler, & Rando, 2011). Researchers have found evidence that interpersonal stressors impact psychological well-being more severely than other type of stressor (Aanes, Mittelmark, Hetland, 2010; Jackson & Finney, 2002). Interpersonal stress has been linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety, more problems with substance use, and higher suicidal ideation (Anderson, Salk, & Hyde, 2015; Simon & Barrett, 2010; Drum, Brownson, Burton Denmark, & Smith, 2009).

Given that interpersonal stress can be more devastating to mental health than other type of stressor, the effects of interpersonal stress on academic performance should be of particular interest for researchers. Additionally, students who are distressed are more likely to drop out of college and are at risk for taking their own lives (Tobey, 1997; Drum, Brownson, Burton Denmark, & Smith, 2009) This report examines the effects of interpersonal stress on mental health in college students, focusing on the effects of stress experienced in romantic relationships, and makes an argument that interpersonal stress has a negative impact on academic performance in college aged students. Counseling implications for working with this population will also be proposed as well as suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To fully understand what programming may be implemented on college and university campuses, the effects of interpersonal stress on well-being and academic performance must be examined. This literature review first reviews the effects of general stress on mental health, cognitive functioning, and well-being, and the mechanisms underlying how one determines that a situation is stressful or threatening. Stress in college students is examined specifically as well, as how interpersonal stress, and more specifically how interpersonal stress within a romantic relationship, effects this population. By understanding the nature of relationship problems and the effects on well-being, mental health professionals on college and university campuses can best develop programming that will target this complaints.

Stress

Stress can be broadly defined as an external event that has an effect on the individual (Sutton, 2011). Lazarus's transactional stress theory defines stress as a relationship between the person and the environment that the person perceives as taxing or exceeding their personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In other words, stress results when an individual perceives that the demands of a situation exceed their resources. Therefore, stress may be defined differently from person to person. A situation that one individual finds stressful, may not be perceived as stressful to another person (Sutton, 2011; Lupien, Maheu, Tu, Fiocco, & Schramek,

2007). Stressors can be defined as events, problems, or pressures that are perceived as stressful (Abouserie, 1994).

Lazarus (2006) uses the term appraisal to describe the cognitive evaluation that takes place when individuals are faced with demanding situations. He distinguishes between primary and secondary appraisals. Primary appraisals have to do with whether or not what is going on in an individual's environment is relevant to their own values, goals, beliefs about self and the world and situational intentions. One determines whether or not a demanding situation is a threat, challenge, or harm-loss. Any situation that is appraised as a threat will be perceived as a stressful situation that will likely cause future harm. Something that is perceived as a harm-loss means that the damage has already been done, and a challenging situation is one where the individual feels they have adequate resources to deal with the situation.

Secondary appraisals are a cognitive-evaluative process on what can be done about the stressful person-environment relationship. In other words, it is an evaluation of coping options and what the individual can do to cope with the situation. Primary and secondary appraisals are actually done simultaneously and do not differ in timing but in content (Lazarus, 2006).

Lazarus (2006) also notes that stress and emotions are interrelated. When talking about stress, one must talk about emotions as well. When people become stressed, they experience negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, sadness or distress. Though seemingly counterintuitive, even positive emotions can be associated with stress, including happiness, love, and gratitude. Lazarus notes that

while certain positive emotions may be categorized as positive because they are associated with favorable circumstances, they are also closely related to harm or threat. For example, an individual may worry that the favorable conditions contributing to their happiness will end, so they engage in coping efforts in order to prevent that from happening. In terms of love, when an individual thinks that their partner is losing interest or is perceived as rejecting them, it can produce a great amount of stress.

People also use emotional appraisals to evaluate situations (Lazarus, 2006). Individuals experience affective or emotional response based off of their appraisal of a situation. For example, when a person goes on a first date, they may experience happiness, excitement, or giddiness because they have appraised the event as a positive event with future potential. Conversely, if the person appraises the date as a negative experience, they may feel sadness, emptiness, dejection, or disgust (Scherer, Shorr, & Johnstone, 2001). Events that are perceived as undesirable, uncontrollable, and unpredictable are especially distressing (Jackson & Finney, 2002).

Coping resources can be defined as physical, social, and psychological assets that are useful in dealing with demands (Matheny, 1986). Coping resources refers to an individual's ability for dealing with potentially demanding events and can be thought of as a necessary skill for daily functioning (McCarthy, Lambert, & Brack, 1997). Coping, however, has been defined by Folkman and Lazarus (1988) as cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage situations that are appraised as taxing or

exceeding resources of the individual. In other words, coping refers to specific efforts to deal with a stressor (McCarthy et al., 1997).

Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, and Gruen, (1986), found that coping and cognitive appraisals mediate stressful person-environment relationships for immediate and long-term outcomes. Coping impacts an individual's stress responses, including emotional reactions. Persons with high levels of certain types of coping resources should be less likely to appraise a situation as demanding and therefore are less likely to view the situations as stressful (McCarthy et al., 1997). Therefore when working with individuals to reduce their experience of stress, clinicians should be working to increase the individual's healthy coping resources.

Effects of Stress

Stress impacts many parts of people's functioning and can impact cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological responses (Baghurst & Kelley, 2014). A small or optimal amount of stress may actually have a positive effect on a person's functioning and be useful to that individual. Pressures and demands that an individual perceives to be within their limits may actually motivate and encourage the individual.

However, when individuals do not have effective coping skills to deal with a stressor, stress is perceived as uncontrollable or unmanageable, an individual begins to experience negative repercussions. Excessive stress can cause fatigue, loss of appetite, headaches, or gastrointestinal problems (Winkelman, 1994). Other physical complaints associated with stress are lightheadedness, dizziness, problems

with sleep, and nausea, hypertension, high levels of muscle tension, and lowering of immune system defenses (Baghurst & Kelley, 2014; Wright & Loving, 2011).

Stress and Mental Health

In order to understand interpersonal stress may affect academic performance, we must first examine the effects of stress on mental health and cognitive processes. Byproducts of stress hormones can have a sedative effect on the human body. When hormone byproducts occur in large amounts, as they do when an individual is faced with a stressful situation, the byproducts may contribute to feelings of low energy or depression (Muscatell, Slavich, Monroe, & Gotlib 2009).

Increased stress levels have been linked to anxiety and depression (Muscatell, Slavich, Monroe, & Gotlib 2009; Aanes, Mittelmark, Hetland, 2010; Moriya & Takahashi, 2013; McLaughlin & Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Using the Beck Depression Inventory, Muscatell et al, (2009) found that individuals experiencing severe major life events and problems with chronic stress also reported more severe symptoms of depression. Hammen (2005) found that chronic stress predicted increased depression in both adult and children populations. For individuals with bipolar disorder, stress can trigger both depressive and manic mood states, as well as worsen a bipolar mood episode, increasing its intensity or extending the duration of the episode.

Symptoms of depression include the diminished ability to think or concentrate, which can negatively affect an individual's performance in cognitively demanding tasks (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with depression may appear easily distracted and complain of memory difficulties. The

DSM-V states that individuals (children and young adults) who are engaged in school may experience a drop in grades due to problems with concentration, while older individuals who experience memory problems as a result of depression may be mistaken for early signs of dementia.

Similarly, symptoms of anxiety also include difficulty concentrating and memory problem (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with anxiety may have difficulty keeping worrisome thoughts from interfering with attention to present tasks. Anxiety can cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, and other important areas of functioning.

Experience of stressful life events has also been linked to emotional dysregulation: poor understanding of emotional reactions to stress, poor coping with anger and sadness, and ruminative responses to distress (McLaughlin & Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Inadequately managed stress has also been linked to feelings of loneliness, nervousness, hopelessness, sleeplessness, and excessive worrying (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999).

Individuals who are stressed may engage in negative coping habits such as alcohol or drug use (Anthenelli, 2012). Psychosocial stressors like loss of child, death of a loved one, unfaithfulness by others, being a victim of violence or observing violence are all challenges that may lead one to self-medicate. These individuals may be attempting to deal with emotional pain and unpleasant memories by self- medicating.

Stress and Cognitive Functioning

Understanding how stress can affect cognitive functioning, can give a better ideas as to how stress and academic performance are related. While stress impacts many area of an individual's life, one aspect of functioning that researchers have dedicated a lot of attention to is how stress affects cognitive functions (Lupien, et al, 2004). Stress has been linked to problems with thinking, memory, behavior, and concentration. Researchers have found that stress is related to impaired memory both during the stressful event and after the event has taken place (Tollenaar, Elzinga, Spinhoven, & Everaerd, 2007; Schwabe & Wolf, 2010).

Additionally, stress has been linked to slower recall of information. When subjected to mild forms of emotional and situational stress, women who were in the stress condition took 10% more time to recall information (Schwabe & Wolf, 2010). Both free recall and recognition performance were impacted negatively. Stress also had a significant impact on participant's attentional state when encoding, indicating that individuals who are stressed may have difficulties focusing their attention. These findings also indicated that stress has memory impairing effects on learning, which may affect academic performance.

When stressed, hormones flood the area of the brain that controls working memory, the prefrontal cortex, where new information is processed and retained, impairing cognitive processes (Lupien, Maheu, Tu, Fiocco, & Shchramek, 2007). Stress can trigger emotional responses and because research suggests that both cognitive tasks and emotional responses make use of the same limited resources,

the resources used to perform a cognitive task may no longer be available for emotional processes when an individual is stressed (Van Dillen & Koole, 2007).

Stress and Academic Performance

Given that stress has a negative impact on cognitive functioning, researchers have also examined how perceived stress can affect student's performance in the classroom. Since stress has been associated with decreased ability to focus and memory impairment, students who are under high levels of stress may not be able to study effectively, having trouble retaining the material, and may struggle with testing, having trouble retrieving information (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011; Linn & Zeppa, 1984).

Stress can prevent students from being successful in their educational goals (Murff, 2005). Academic performance was found to be impaired for students who reported high levels of stress (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000). When in the classroom, a student's emotional response to a stressor may obstruct him or her from focusing on class or schoolwork (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011). Replicating other studies, Pritchard and Wilson (2003), found that college students reporting high levels of stress were more likely to have a lower GPA than students who did not report significant levels of stress. In medical students, stress has been found to negatively effect academic performance (Linn & Zeppa, 1984; Stewart, Lam, Betson, Wong, & Wong, 1999).

In a study that examined the relationship between self-efficacy, stress, and academic success in college, researchers found that stress was negatively correlated with GPA (Zajacova, Lynch, Espenshade, 2005). Students who are depressed have

been found to have lower GPAs than students who are not depressed (Fazio & Palm, 1998). Students who withdrew from college on medical leave for mental health reasons had significantly higher GPAs upon re-enrollment than they did at the time of distress, suggesting that mental health issues have a negative impact on students' GPAs (Meilman, Manley, Gaylor, & Turco, 1992). Along those lines, students who report problems with anxiety are more likely to drop out than students who do not report having problems with anxiety (Tobey, 1997).

College Students and Stress

Due to the transitional nature of college life and developmental stage of students, college students are particularly vulnerable to stress (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999; Stevens & Morris, 2007). College students can be classified in the emerging adulthood developmental stage, the transition period between adolescence and young adulthood, encompassing the ages between 18 and 25 (Arnett, 2000, 2012). During this stage, goals focus primarily on exploration of identity and life course, including career, education, and relationships (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007).

College students are exposed to a variety of novel experiences (Lee & Jang, 2015). It is often the first time they have been away from home and must adjust to being away from their parents and family (Whitman, Spendlove, & Clark, 1984). They may be living with complete strangers (Killam, 2014). Even living with friends and learning how to share living space with people who are not relatives can be a difficult adjustment (Killam, 2014; Marek, Wanzer, & Knapp, 2004). Without their parents directing their actions, students may find themselves overwhelmed with

new responsibilities such as money management, food preparation, time management, and basic chores like laundry (Killam, 2014). Students who have a particularly difficult time adjusting to being away from home may develop homesickness (Magruder & Degges-White, 2014).

Additionally, college coursework is often much more academically rigorous and demanding than high school course work, which may come as a shock to some students (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999; Lee & Jang, 2015). Testing format and teaching methods may differ vastly from what they are accustomed to (Magruder & Degges-White, 2014). Students often report feeling overwhelmed by their workload, studying for exams, exam grades, and the need to excel in school (Abouserie, 1994). Some students may also feel an additional sense of pressure to succeed from their parents back at home and a sense of being a small fish in a big pond when they may have been used to feeling like the big fish in the small pond in high school (Magruder & Degges-White, 2014).

Students are also exposed to new social situations, having to make new friends for the first time, and may be exploring the development of adult intimate relationships (Michel & Randick, 2014). As students progress in their college career, there is also pressure to choose and finalize majors, career plans, and/or further schooling (Magruder & Degges-White, 2014).

When surveyed, both male and female college students reported change in eating and sleeping habits, new responsibilities, heavier work loads and breaks as being prominent stressors in their lives (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999). In a similar study done with just female college students, financial problems, test

pressure, failing a test, rejection from someone, dissolution of relationships, depression, and feelings of low self-esteem were reported as stressors (Frazier & Schauben, 1994). Researchers have found that 75% to 80% of college students report being moderately stressed and 10% to 12% are severely stressed (Abouserie, 1994; Pierceall & Keim, 2007). Results of the study conducted by Abouserie (1994) indicate that one in 10 students may need professional support for their levels of stress.

Problems with relationships is the number three reason why students seek mental health counseling at mental health centers on campus, second only to depression and anxiety (Green, Lowry, & Kopta, 2003; Cairns, Massfeller, & Deeth, 2010; Barr, Krylowicz, Reetz, Mistler, & Rando, 2011; Gallagher, 2011). Students often describe the process of establishing, creating, and maintaining relationships with significant others while also exploring one's own identity as a source of stress (Arnett, 2000; Hermann & Benoit, 2014). It is likely that there is an overlap in relationship issues and other student issues. Romantically involved students may seek help from the mental health center on campus for anxiety which could actually be attributed to the overwhelming nature of juggling time spent with a partner, time set aside for personal well-being, and academic workload (Zusman & Knox, 1998; Michel & Randick, 2014). Additionally, relationship problems, depression, and anxiety are not mutually exclusive problems. Relationship problems have been linked causes for both depression and anxiety (Anderson, Salk, & Hyde, 2015; Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010).

When surveyed, students identified a number of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and academic stressors in their lives (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999). Interpersonal stressors included conflict with roommates, fights with boyfriend or girlfriend, new girlfriend or boyfriend, and trouble with parents (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999).

Interpersonal Stress

Although many events can be stressful for young adults, stress in interpersonal relationships may be the biggest challenge (Jackson & Finney, 2002). Interpersonal stress can be defined as stress that takes place in the context of relationships with others (Buitron, Hill, Pettit, Green, Hatkevich, & Sharp, 2015). A primary source of interpersonal stress is conflict. Relationships that cause an individual stress are often ridden with conflict and tension and involve arguments, quarrels, negative attitudes or behavior, an uncomfortable atmosphere, and concern about hurting others' feelings (Kato, 2013).

Occasional disagreements and arguments between individuals and their friends or romantic partners may be beneficial and even strengthen the relationship, opening the door for individuals to discuss their wants and needs, however long term unresolved conflicts are linked to relationship instability, general life dissatisfaction, depression, distress, and anxiety (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997; Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982; Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999; Sheffield, Carey, Patenaude, & Lambert, 1995; Cupach & Canary, 1997).

Interpersonal conflict generally contains three important features: some form of interaction between individuals, interdependence between the individuals,

and an incompatibility based on perception or values (Barki and Hartwick, 2004). Conflict often evokes negative emotions and outcomes such as anger, frustration, anxiety, and mistrust. Hurt, jealousy, and embarrassment are other emotions associated with interpersonal conflict (LaBelle, Booth-Butterfield, & Weber, 2013).

Interpersonal conflicts have a serious impact on individual's well-being and have been reported as the most frequent and troubling form of daily stressor (Mattlin, Wethington, & Kessler, 1990; Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler & Schilling, 1989). Most research investigating the degree to which interpersonal conflict in specific relationships impacts individual's mental health has focused on adolescent or middle-aged adult populations, rather than the college aged population (Jackson & Finney, 2002; Darling, McWey, Howard, & Olmstead, 2007). In a sample of 1,556 married couples interviewed about stressors in the past twelve months, 31.2% reported interpersonal stressors as being the most prevalent stressor in their lives (Mattlin, Wethington, & Kessler, 1990).

Married couples were asked to fill out daily diary questionnaires for six weeks where they noted any daily stressor experienced that day as well as their mood (Bolger et al, 1989). Daily stressors were divided into ten different categories including overload at home, overload at work family demands, other demands, transportation problems, financial problems, interpersonal conflicts or tensions with one's spouse, interpersonal conflict or tension with one's child, or interpersonal conflict or tension with a single other person, and interpersonal conflict or tension experienced with multiple other people on the same day. Mood

items were designed to measure anxiety, hostility and depression (Bolger et al, 1989).

Based off of these reports, Bolger et al, (1989) found that individuals who experienced conflict with their romantic partner, children, friends, and other peers (coworkers, relatives, etc) reported significantly lower mood on those days than on days where they experienced non-interpersonal related stressors. Conflict and tensions with others were experienced as the most distressing daily stressor and had the most enduring effects. Daily stressors that occurred multiple days in a row that were not related to interpersonal conflict were shown to have the strongest effect on mood during the first day, suggesting capacity for emotional habituation. However with interpersonal conflict, especially with marital conflicts, there was a significant increase in the emotional impact as the conflict extended for multiple days. This suggests that with stress experienced due to interpersonal conflict, emotional habituation does not occur. These findings replicated findings from previous studies that indicated that negative social interactions impacted emotional well-being negatively (Rook, 1984; Abbey, Abramis, & Caplan, 1985).

Studies that have focused on college-aged populations indicate that interpersonal conflict and strained relationships with others heighten levels of distress and is a prominent stressor in students' lives (Jackson & Finney, 2002; Darling, McWey, Howard, Olmstead, 2007). Jackson and Finney (2002) found that interpersonal stress was correlated with more symptoms of depression and anxiety and higher levels of anger/hostility. However, the impact of interpersonal stress on

mental health was not examined in comparison to other types of stressors as have been done with other populations.

While much of research done with college students have not examined the degree to which various stressors impact a student's functioning, studies that have rank ordered stressors have indicated that interpersonal stressors may not have as great of an impact of functioning as it does on older adults. In a study where students were asked to rank order stressors in their life, grades were reported as the greatest stressor, followed by lack of money, and uncertainty of professional futures (Darling, McWey, Howard, & Olmstead, 2005). Abouserie (1994) also found that academics were found to be the most stressful stressor for undergraduates. Examinations and their results as well as feeling overwhelmed by workload were reported specifically as a source of stress. Ross, Niebling, and Heckert (1999) found that undergraduates in their sample reported intrapersonal sources of stress such as changes in sleeping and eating habits, increase in class workload, and new responsibilities, as the most common source of stress.

While interpersonal conflict may not be the most prominent stressor in college students' lives as it is in middle-aged adult's lives, due to developmental differences, given that problems in relationships is one of the most common reasons for seeking counseling, it can be surmised that interpersonal conflict causes significant distress for young adults just as it does in middle-aged adults. Students do report that relationships and interpersonal difficulties are a primary source of stress, even if they are not the most troubling stressor in their lives (Abouserie, 1994; Ross, Niebling, and Heckert, 1999; Jackson & Finney, 2002). Additionally,

problems with relationships are one of the most common reasons for why students seek mental health counseling on college campuses (Green, Lowry, & Kopta, 2003; Cairns, Massfeller, & Deeth, 2010; Barr, Krylowicz, Reetz, Mistler, & Rando, 2011; Gallagher, 2011).

Interpersonal stress does not necessarily stem from solely overtly negative events. Researchers found that college students who reported having workplace relationships that consisted of co-occurring positive and negative interactions had worse self-reported mental health than students who reporting having solely positive interactions in their workplace relationships (Vaughn, Drake, & Haydock, 2015). The researchers concluded that having ambiguous or ambivalent interactions could lead to the experience of interpersonal stress because ambivalent relationships are more complex, unpredictable, and difficult to avoid than solely negative interactions.

Not only does interpersonal stress effect mental health, but it also effects physical health, studies have also shown that conflict in close relationships, especially conflict in close romantic relationships, affects cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune functioning (Wright & Loving, 2011). Disagreement with romantic partners was found to increase blood pressure and heart rate (Nealey-Moore et al, 2007; Smith & Gallo, 1999; Smith et al, 2009). Men and women experienced changes in specific hormones that can lead to weakened immune system (Wright & Loving, 2011). Interpersonal conflict also affects the rate at which the body heals, couples who engaged in a conflict interaction had blisters that healed at a slower rate than couples who engaged in a supportive interaction (Wright & Loving, 2011).

In a study examining quality of interpersonal interactions of college students on physical health and stress, Edwards, Hersherber, Russell, and Market (2001), found that negative social exchange had a greater impact on physical health symptoms than life-event stress, daily hassles, or social support.

While interpersonal stress may encompass troubled relationships with friends, parents, or other important people in students' lives, researchers have found that problems involving intimate relationships are the most frequently reported stressor amongst college students (Jackson & Finney, 2002). Stress can be triggered whenever relationships are developing or ending (Jackson & Finney, 2002). Exposure to and participation in conflict has been linked to depression, distress, and anxiety, feelings of hurt and anger, and relationship dissatisfaction (Aloia & Solomon, 2015). Researchers have found that there is more of an increase in depressive symptom than any other type of stress in the context of a romantic relationship (Aanes, Mittelmark, Hetland, 2010).

The association between depressive symptoms and interpersonal functioning, especially amongst romantic relationships has been researched over the years (Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb & Fincham, 2004). Several studies spanning several different populations such as college students, adult outpatients with unipolar or bipolar disorder, and children of depressed women showed a match between negative interpersonal event and attaching great importance to relationships with others was especially predictive of depressive reactions

For college students, conflict in relationships may be particularly damaging to mental health because college students are at a stage in their life where peer

groups are one of the most necessary and influential support systems (Jackson & Finney, 2002). Because young adults have a strong need to feel that they belong, there is a lot of interdependency and importance in their peer relationships (Jackson & Finney, 2002; Magruder and Degges-White, 2014).

Romantic Stress

Because of the interdependent nature of the relationship and intense emotion associated with an intimate relationship, the effects of stress in a romantic relationship can be more troubling than stress in any other interpersonal relationship (Vangesti, 2007). Researchers found that college students reported that most hurtful episodes involved romantic partners or close friends. Ratings of hurt and perceived rejection were highest in the context of a romantic relationship (Leary, Springer, Negel Ansell, and Evans, 1998). In a study asking students to think of a particular interpersonal transgression, over 74% of individuals recalled an event-taking place with a romantic partner (Labelle, Booth-Butterfield, & Weber, 2013).

In a sample of 18 to 23 year olds that examined the impact of non-marital romantic relationships on mental health, researchers found that quality of relationships impacted mental health (Simon & Barrett, 2010). Partner support was associated with lower levels of depression while partner strain was associated with high levels of depression. Both men and women reported being equally impacted by strained interactions with their partners. Researchers concluded that partner support likely strengthens an existing identity and feelings of self worth while partner strain likely threatens a valued identity and feelings of self-worth.

Simon & Barret (2010), also found links between substance use and relationship quality. Partner support in an ongoing relationship was associated with fewer substance abuse problems while partner strain was associated with more substance abuse problems. However unlike depression and relationship quality, gender differences were found with substance abuse and relationship quality. Men who experienced interpersonal stress in a romantic relationship were found to be more likely to have substance abuse problems than women reporting interpersonal stress in an ongoing relationship.

Romantic stress has been linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms in adolescents (Anderson, Salk, & Hyde, 2015). In a study of high school females transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, risk factors for elevated risk of depression included symptoms, family functioning and psychiatric functioning, and interpersonal adjustment and stressors.

Evoked negative mood may lead to depressive symptoms: increased stress is linked to onset of depressive symptoms (Mucatell et al, 2009; You and Conner, 2009) Studies done with the adult population have also shown that marital discord puts an individual at risk for depression (Davila, 2001). Low levels of marital satisfaction are linked to higher levels of dysphoria and marriages that are perceived as unsupportive and unsafe increases vulnerability to depression (Beach & O'Leary, 1993; Jacobson, Fruzzetti, Dobson, Whisman & Hops, 1993). Because undergraduate and graduate students have identified problems with romantic relationships as one of the greatest factors contributing to suicidal ideation, it is of utmost importance that mental health counselors working on college or university

campuses be aware of how to help students navigate relationship problems and cope in a healthy manner (Drum, Brownson, Burton Denmark, & Smith, 2009; Michel & Randick, 2014). Preventative programming on college campuses that helps students learn positive attitudes and behaviors is also crucial.

Nature of relationship problems

In order to develop the most effective interventions and programs on college campuses, teaching students how to develop healthy relationships and cope with conflict in those relationships, we must understand what causes conflict in romantic relationships. In a survey of undergraduates who had never been married, researchers found that both casual and “involved” daters reported that communication was one of their biggest relationship problems (Zusman & Knox, 1998). People in dissatisfying relationships generally experience more misperception, misunderstanding, and negative emotion during conflict than people in satisfying relationships (Sillars et al, 2000). Negative nonverbal behavior and increased expression of criticism, hostility, and rejection are also characteristic of distressed couples (Leymar & Dobush, 2015).

Vangelisti (2007) suggested that whenever two people communicate with each other, they risk hurting each other’s feelings, a risk that is heightened when conflict is involved. Accusations, orders, and negative disclosures are often hurtful ways of communication (Vangesti, 2009). Studies have shown that when at least one of the individuals in a romantic relationship engages in negativity during problem solving interactions, there is lower satisfaction with the relationship reported by the couple. Nagging or criticizing has also been linked to dissatisfaction, decreases in

satisfaction, and break ups (Caughlin & Vangesti, 2006) Additionally angry, frustrated, blaming thoughts are more prevalent during severe conflicts and unhappy relationships (Sillars et al, 2000).

With the use of technology in modern times, text messaging is a common mode of communication for college students (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). Text messaging can provide a sense of connection, but it can also provide a sense of autonomy since it allows for communication that is not face-to-face (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011). Because of this duality, texting can create tension between couples. Most tension is related to differing sense of expectations. Researchers found that college aged couples develop expectations and rules for frequency of communication and when those expectations are violated, conflict often arises (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011). One partner may feel that the other partner does not call or text enough which can also lead to anxiety about the partner's level of commitment or faithfulness (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011; Michel & Randick, 2014). Additionally, when partners do not call or text message at agreed upon times, partners may become upset with each other. On the flip side, problems may also arise when one partner perceives a lack of autonomy produced by excessive calling and texting or expectations of availability from the other partner.

For students involved in long distance relationships, texting and social networking is the primary form of communication. Students in these relationships may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing discomfort with different texting styles and expectations (Michel & Randick, 2014).

Jealousy was also identified as an issue for both casual and involved daters. Other issues for college students in romantic relationships were lack of time for the relationship, different values, unhealthy relationships, and breakup (Darling, McWey, Howard, & Olstead, 2007, Zusman & Knox, 1998). Perceived imbalances in power have also been linked to decreased satisfaction in relationship and increases in conflict and probability of break up, (Femlee, 1994).

Perceived differences in how much each person in the relationship invests and cares about the relationship is indicative of relationship stability (Murray, 1999). Couples where both members compromise their own self-interest from time to time for the greater good of their relationship learn over time that each partner cares about the relationship. When any issues or problems arise, partners in the relationship are likely to believe that the problem is transitional or of minimal importance in relation to more positive situations. These couples are more likely to stay together than couples that consist of at least one member who is more self-interested and places their own interests above all else. Individuals in relationships who are not willing to compromise their self interests communicate to their partner that they do not value the relationship and that the relationship is not a high priority (Arriaga, 2009).

Furthermore, specifically for college students, defining the relationship may cause anxiety (Nelms, Knox, & Easterling, 2012). College relationships no longer follow clear stages of relationship development like they did in previous generations. In the current culture of college relationships, many students prefer to explore relationship potential by “hooking-up,” or being intimate physically with

another individual with no expected romantic commitment (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010). Hooking up is ambiguous by nature and can produce anxiety when an individual cannot gauge whether their partner feels the same way as them but is too afraid to initiate a conversation pertaining to commitment (Nelms, Knox, & Easterling, 2012). Additionally, due to traditional sociocultural expectations where men are praised for their sexual prowess and experience, but women are shamed for the same behaviors, women are more likely to feel guilty or anxious if they engage in casual sex (Fielder & Carey, 2010).

Breakup Distress

While any conflict in a romantic relationship can be distressing, a branch of research has been dedicated to specifically examining the effects of terminating of a romantic relationship on college students' mental health. Termination of relationship is one of the most common presenting issues seen in college mental health centers (Michel & Randick, 2014). Breakup distress can take the form of complicated grief, which can be defined as an intense and prolonged period of grief following a loss (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010). Feelings of rejection in romantic relationships can be devastating (MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Fisher 2004). Fisher (2004) even proposes that being rejected in love is one of the most painful experiences a human can endure due to the various brain processes and neurotransmitters released in the presence and absence of love. Because love really does mimic a drug, loss of love elicit symptoms similar to withdrawal from an illicit substance (Fisher, 2004).

Symptoms of breakup distress include intense intrusive thoughts, pangs of severe emotion, distressing yearnings, feeling excessively alone and empty, unusual sleep disturbances and loss of interest in personal activities (Horowitz et al, 1997). Grief can often lead to depression (Morris, Reiver, and Roman, 2015). Research indicates that college students with high breakup distress scores also had high depression scores and higher levels of reported anxiety (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, Delgado, 2011; Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003).

When assessing individuals who had recently been rejected by a former lover, researchers found that more than 40% of the individuals were clinically depressed and 12% of the 40% were suffering moderate to severe depression (Mearns, 1991). Intrusive thoughts may be one of the most troubling aspects of a breakup because they are continual and uncontrollable (Field et al, 2011; Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, Delgado, 2012). College students with higher breakup distress scores also scored higher on all measures for intrusive thoughts (Field, et al, 2012).

In a study that examined the effects of breakup distress and students' perceived academic performance, researchers found that breakup distress had a negative impact on perceived performance (Field et al, 2012). Break up distress affected students' concentration, homework, test performance and grades. However, it should be noted that further research needs to be conducted to examine whether students' academic performance is affected by breakup distress since this study examined perceptions of performance.

Many of the reasons that college students report as reasons for relationship termination are the same as general conflict experienced in the relationship. These

reasons can be broken into five general categories: intimacy, affiliation, sexuality, and autonomy (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010). Within those general categories are subcategories like poor communication, distrust, unreciprocated love arguments, and diminishing empathy, boredom, lack of time together, dissimilar interests and traits, diminishing of physical attraction and affection, and problem maintaining independent self and lack of control. Subcategories related to decreasing intimacy (poor communication, unreciprocated empathy, arguments, etc.) were the most reported reasons for breakups.

Students in relationships that reported being in relationships that produced fluctuating levels of relationship satisfaction are more likely to terminate their relationship than students who reported consistent satisfaction (Arriaga, 2000).

Breakup distress has been found to be experienced more intensely for individual's who do not take responsibility for the breakup, instead attributing the breakup to the other person, such as due to the partner's mood or insensitivity, or to environmental factors, such as work stress or friends being disruptive to the relationship (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Feeling that the breakup was sudden and unexpected, feeling rejected and betrayed, and not initiating the relationship were also reported as factors that intensify the feelings of breakup distress (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010).

Summary of Literature Review

Previous research has shown that stress can negatively impact mental health, cognitive functioning, and academic performance (Muscatell et al, 2009; Lupien, et al., 2004; Linn & Zeppa, 1984). Stress has been linked to depression and anxiety

(McLaughlin & Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Mucatell et al., 2009; Aanes et al., 2010).

Individuals experiencing a great amount of stress have reported feelings of loneliness, nervousness, hopelessness, and isolation (Ross et al., 1999).

Researchers have taken a particular interest in the effects of interpersonal stress on an individual's well-being (Davila, 2001; Fisher, 2004; Wright & Loving, 2011). In middle age adult populations, researchers have found evidence indicating that interpersonal stress is the most frequent and troubling form of daily stressors (Mattlin, et al., 1990; Bolger et al., 1989). While college aged populations do not necessarily report interpersonal stress as the most troubling stressor in their lives, research still indicates that problems in relationships are a primary concern and brings many students to counseling (Abouserie, 1994; Ross et al, 1999; Jackson & Finney, 2002; Green, Lowry, & Kopta, 2003).

Because researchers have found that interpersonal stress experienced within the context of a romantic relationship may have a more serious impact on well-being than any other type of interpersonal stress, this literature review focused on the effects of romantic stress on college students (Aanes. Mittelmark, Hetland, 2010). Romantic stress has been lined to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Anderson, Salk, & Hyde, 2015; Drum et al, 2009).

Factors that increase stress experienced in a romantic relationship are poor communication, especially when navigating through arguments, jealousy, perceived imbalances in power, and perceived differences in how much each person in the relationship invests (Darling et. al; 2007; Femlee, 1994; Murray, 1999; Arriaga, 2009). These factors are also linked to higher likelihood of relationship dissolution

(Zusman & Knox, 1998; Leymar & Dobush, 2015). Since termination of relationship is one of the most common presenting issue in college mental health centers, researchers have dedicated special attention to the grief experienced after a break up (Michel & Randick, 2014; Field, et al., 2010).

Given that romantic stress can increase symptoms of depression and anxiety, which can negatively impact focus, motivation, and cognitive functioning, not only does romantic stress have an effect on mental health, but it likely negatively impacts academic performance, as well (Tollenaar, et al., 2007; Schwabe & Wolf, 2010; Aanes, et al., 2010). The next section of this report will explore options for addressing romantic stress and breakup distress on college and university campuses.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

Because problems in relationship effects so many areas in a student's life, including mental health and academic performance, a priority for mental health practitioners on college and university campuses should be equipping students with coping skills to deal with conflict, negotiate intimacy and support, and navigate feelings after a breakup and during conflict in an existing relationship (Davila, 2011). Mental health practitioners working on college campuses can help students cultivate these skills in individual, couple, and group counseling (Michel & Randick, 2014). These skills, positive attitudes, and behaviors, once learned, can be used for the rest of the students' lives, helping them to form and navigate healthy romantic relationships through adulthood (Michel & Randick, 2014).

Interventions are not confined to the counseling office. Psychoeducation, support groups and workshops can support healthy relationship development (Michel & Randick, 2014). Mental health practitioners on campus could offer workshops covering conflict skill training that emphasize stress management and relaxation techniques to prevent emotional flooding, a condition that causes an individual to be overwhelmed by emotion and unable to process information effectively (Aloia & Solomon, 2015). Interventions can also be targeted to decrease intensity of conflict experienced by individuals by reducing competitive or distributive conflict management techniques (Canary, Cupach, & Serpe). By teaching students how to identify the differences between a healthy an unhealthy

relationship and the behaviors associated with both unhealthy and healthy relationships, students can hopefully learn to identify and terminate toxic relationships, reducing the negative impact that these relationships can have on well-being.

Many universities have already acknowledged the importance of teaching college students how to build and maintain healthy relationships. Many university counseling center websites have pages extensively detailing relationships in college and how to navigate those relationships successfully (The Unabridged Student Counseling Virtual Pamphlet Collection).

For instance, Duke University offers a counseling series called “How to be in Love.” The workshop series addresses common issues and questions that students often face in romantic relationships. It is directed not just for individuals currently in relationships, but also students who are interested in being in a romantic relationship (Duke University Student Affairs Website, 2016)

The workshop is comprised of four sessions. Session one covers how to recognize love, distinguishing between infatuation and love. Prerequisites for falling in love and how to cultivate those factors are also covered, as well as how to maintain a loving relationship. Session two explores the common stages of romantic relationships and teaches students the qualities of a healthy and enriching relationship. Effective communication, relationship integrity, and trust are also covered. During session three, students learn how to recognize when a relationship is toxic. Gender dynamics and social norms are also explored as well as how they

impact the difficulty to break off a toxic relationship. Session four focuses on breaking-up and how to cope with a difficult breakup.

Effective Communication in Relationships

Because communication has been cited as one of the biggest relationship problems for college students in romantic relationships, interventions targeting communication should be implemented on campus (Zusman & Knox, 1998).

Researchers have found that couples that lack the necessary skills to regulate their emotional expressiveness and successfully communicate tend to become defensive or withdraw from a conflict situation (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005).

Students should be taught to distinguish between unhealthy and healthy ways of communicating. Individuals who are more satisfied and invested in their relationships, communicate with their partners more openly, are willing to compromise, and are less likely to engage in destructive ways of communicating such as emotional withdrawal, defensiveness, contempt, and criticism (Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002).

Some programming on university campuses currently draw from Gottman's marital research, adapting effective communication research done with that population for college students (Gottman, 1994; Michel & Randick, 2014). For instance, Gottman, (1994) proposes that teaching individuals to incorporate the crux of person centered counseling when communicating with their partner can enhance relationships satisfaction. These central tenets include unconditional acceptance, understanding, and genuineness. These qualities foster active listening and perspective taking, allowing individuals to communicate more effectively.

Gottman, (1999) also advocates for couples to learn to use “I” statements rather than “you” statements. For example, rather than saying “You are so insensitive, you just don’t care,” a more effective way of communicating would be saying “I feel like I’m not being understood, and its making me feel upset.”

“You” statements can make the other person feel attacked, increasing the chances that they will react in a defensive manner. They also convey judgment. By using “I” statements, individuals can come off as less accusatory, more approachable, and makes the speaker take responsibility for his or her emotions.

Teaching students more healthy ways of communicating with their partners can increase relationship satisfaction, in turn boosting well-being (Michel & Randick, 2014). These skills could be built into the psychoeducation component of a mindfulness based relationship enhancement program, which will be described in more detail later in this report, or be stand-alone workshops.

As noted earlier in this report, because text messaging is a primary source of communication for many college couples, university students could also benefit from interventions targeted towards virtual communication (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). While on the one hand, use of text messaging allows “perpetual contact” throughout the day and can facilitate feelings of closeness between partners, it can also create a potential when partners have differences in virtual communication styles (Michel & Randick, 2014; Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011). Relationships are characterized by contradictory and simultaneous needs of partners to feel connected and close to one another but also remain independent individuals (Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Text messaging can exacerbate this

paradox. Katz and Aakhus (2002) argue that use of cellphones to communicate raise new questions about “appropriate contact,” and can lead to individuals feeling less control in their lives.

Problems may arise from perceiving that one’s partner does not call or text frequently enough (Michel & Randick, 2014; Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011). Couples may experience a discrepancy between expectations for frequency and timing of communication. In order to address these issues, counselors may need to work with couples to help them understand the other partner’s level of need for autonomy. Counselors can also help mediate conversations about what are reasonable and unreasonable expectations for technological connectivity, so that individuals are on the same page (Michel & Randick, 2014; Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011).

Conflict Management

An important part of how partners communicate with one another is how they deal with conflict (Gordon & Chen, 2016). How partners orient and interpret romantic challenges influences how one conceptualizes the relationship. Researchers have found evidence supporting the hypothesis that conflict only leads to reduced relationship satisfaction when romantic partners do not feel their thoughts, feelings, and point of view are understood by their partners (Gordon & Chen, 2016). In other words, feeling understood acts as a buffer between the negative effects of conflict on relationship satisfaction. Perceiving one’s romantic partner as understanding when conflict arises, helps people feel cared about and secure in their relationships. Researchers hypothesized that these feelings of security and being cared about in turn fosters a sense of understanding in the

person themselves, allowing the individual to respond in ways that are constructive rather than with hostility or anger (Gordon & Chen, 2016).

Other research suggests that people are more likely to respond constructively to relationship problems when they feel secure and validated by their romantic partners (Murray & Holmes, 2009). When conflict communication involves positive behaviors such as, affection, affiliate humor, or effective problem solving, conflicts can actually be constructive and strengthen the relationship (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008). Use of these positive behaviors, especially affiliate humor, can produce a cognitive affective shift where the situation or conflict is reframed to seem less threatening (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008).

Therapists working on college and university campuses can work with students to develop skills that convey understanding of where their partner is coming from, even if they do not necessarily agree with their partner during a conflict. The purpose of any argument should be a solution, not a time to yell about everything (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008). Exercises that encourage perspective seeking would also be beneficial. Additionally, therapists can also work with clients to build positive behaviors and remind them that use of these skills during conflict management can be beneficial to the relationship.

Interpersonal Coping Strategies

As noted earlier in the stress portion of this report, individuals with higher levels of certain types of coping resources are less likely to perceive an interpret a situation as stressful (McCarthy et al., 1997). Researchers have proposed that interpersonal stressors can lead to distress when individuals fail to cope adaptively

with the stressor (Hammes, Hagan, & Joiner, 2013). Mental health practitioners on college campuses should strive to teach students effective ways of coping with interpersonal stressors.

In stress literature, researchers have identified two types of coping. These types of coping are preventative efforts of coping, which include resources that mitigate or minimize initial impact of stressors, and more combative forms of coping that involve active or passive attempts to deal with a stressor that has already occurred (Matheny et al., 1986). McCarthy et al. (1997) suggest that combative coping resources may be most useful when helping students adjust to a breakup, changing the emotions associated with the dissolution of the relationship, while bolstering preventive resources may prevent or reduce relationship stress in that students should be less likely to make the initial evaluation that conflict in a relationship or a break-up is a stressor. Instead, individuals may feel that they have more control over their situation and can effectively deal with the problem. Examples of preventive types of coping resources include confidence in one's ability, self-directedness, financial and physical resources, and affected appraisals and the immediate experience of negative emotions. Combative types of coping resources include problem solving, tension control, and self-disclosure (McCarthy et al, 1997).

Kato (2013) proposed three types of coping strategies for dealing with interpersonal stressors, specifically. These strategies were reassessing coping, distancing coping, and constructive coping.

Reassessing coping is an active strategy that involves exercising self-control, avoiding premature action, and waiting patiently for a change or improvement in

the situation and an appropriate opportunity to act (Kato, 2013). This type of coping allows for people to take time to deal with a stressful relationship, get a better grasp of the situation, control their emotions and consider appropriate ways to act. Reassessing coping increases likelihood that the stressful situation will improve. Reassessing coping has also been associated with less depressive symptoms, anxiety, and general distress in college students. These skills can be easily integrated into a mindfulness based programs, which will be detailed further in depth later in the report, because they allow for one to distance themselves from negative emotions when they are evoked.

Distancing coping, on the other hand, encompasses strategies that attempt to actively damage, disrupt, and dissolve stressful relationships. Examples of this are avoiding contact with the person and ignoring the person (Kato, 2013). This style of coping means intentionally breaking off relations with the other individual involved in the stressful relationship. Predictably, distancing coping is associated with poor interpersonal relationships and higher levels of psychological and physiological distress.

Another type of coping is constructive coping, which involves efforts actively seeking to improve, maintain, or sustain a relationship. There is an emphasis on reflecting on one's own behaviors and trying to understand the other person's feelings.

In a cross-cultural study, Kato (2013, found that in American, Australian and Chinese populations, reassessing coping is associated with reduced depressive symptoms. Individuals were recruited via Internet surveys and were asked to recall

specifics of stress experienced due to interpersonal relationships. These situations could include quarreling with others, worrying if you have hurt someone's feelings, feeling uncomfortable while speaking, etc. The participants were then asked to indicate what types of strategies they used in the various stressful situations encountered. They also filled out a questionnaire used to measure depressive symptoms.

The fact that this study was conducted cross-culturally and had implications for both collectivistic and individualistic cultures is particularly important since university campuses are often made up of diverse student populations of various backgrounds and cultures, including international students. Distancing coping was significantly associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms in all three countries. Lastly, constructive coping was actually significantly associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms in United States and Australian samples, but no significant association was found in the Chinese sample.

This research indicates that programming on college campuses that increases students' coping resources, and more specifically targets reassessing coping can help students deal with interpersonal conflict more effectively, lessening risk for developing depression or anxiety. Since mindfulness based clinical interventions propose reassessing coping skills as a primary skill that individuals should develop, mindfulness based programming may be a good way to implement such curriculum (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal, Williams, Teasdale, 2002; Wells, 2005).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an emerging intervention that can enhance relationship satisfaction and provide individuals with a greater capacity to respond constructively to relationship stress (Barnes, Brown, Kusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007). Mindfulness can be defined as an open or receptive attention to and awareness of what is taking place, both internally and externally, in the present (Brown & Ryan, 2003). It involves teaching individuals how to engage in simple observation of an experience, in a non-judgmental manner, without thinking about, comparing, or evaluating the experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness involves learning how to remain focused on the reality in the present moment, learning how to be accepting and open to whatever is happening in the moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It encourages individuals to become more attuned to internal experiences occurring in each moment experienced, such as bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions (Baer, 2003).

Mindfulness can help individuals cope with stressful situations by developing a perspective on thoughts and feelings so that they are recognized as mental events instead of aspects of self or necessarily accurate reflections of reality (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Through repeated practice, mindfulness techniques allow individuals to develop the ability to calmly step back from thoughts and feelings during stressful situations, rather than engaging in anxious worry, ruminative thoughts, or other negative-thinking patterns that may exacerbate the experience of stress and contribute to increased emotional distress (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Bishop, 2002).

Mindfulness can help individuals evaluate situations as less threatening, initially, therefore minimizes events that perceived as stressful (Bishop, 2002).

Researchers have suggested that mindfulness can enhance the quality of romantic relationships since mindfulness can promote attunement, connection, and closeness in relationships (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 1993). The receptive attentiveness that is promoted in mindfulness can promote a greater ability or willingness to take interest in partner's thoughts, emotions, and welfare. It has also been hypothesized that mindfulness can help individuals develop a mindset that allows them to approach stressful events as challenges instead of threats.

Boorstein (1996) also proposes that mindfulness can help individuals not react as impulsively and destructively to distressing thoughts and emotions. Therefore, in regards to relationships, mindfulness may promote interaction styles that support healthy relationship functioning and enhance romantic relationship quality in general. Mindfulness can also help with negative emotions like jealousy and not reacting impulsively in ways that may further damage the relationship, when one experiences negative emotions.

Gottman, (1994) has noted that being able to disengage from conflict when it is appropriate or necessary should buffer individuals and couples from negative consequences. Failure to disengage from conflict when appropriate, on the other hand, may have serious impacts on the relationship, decreasing relationship satisfaction (Salvatore, Kuo, Steele, Simpson, & Colins, 2011). As mentioned previously, mindfulness techniques can equip individuals with the skills necessary

to calmly step back and evaluate a situation before reacting impulsively, therefore helping individuals disengage from conflict whenever appropriate or avoid responding in a way that may exacerbate the conflict (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Bishop, 2002).

Barnes et al (2007), using correlational, short-term longitudinal, and laboratory means, found a positive relationship between mindfulness and relationship satisfaction in non-married, dating college students. Individuals who scored higher on the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale also reported high levels of satisfaction in their relationship.

Upon further examination of the effects of mindfulness and relationship satisfaction, Barnes et al (2007), found that individuals higher in dispositional mindfulness, in addition to reporting higher relationship satisfaction, also reported a less severe emotional stress response to relationship conflict, lower levels of post discussion anxiety, and anger-hostility. More mindful individuals experienced lower levels of negative emotion and reported more positive perceptions of the partner and the relationship after the exchange.

Researchers proposed that more mindful people enter conflict discussions with lower anxiety and anger-hostility and may have a more stable perception of their relationship so that conflicts do not have as much of a negative impact as it does with less mindful individuals (Barnes et al, 2007).

In this study, college couples that had been dating for at least three months were recruited for an in-laboratory study. Couples were instructed to discuss think of two topics that were considered major issues in their relationship or two things

that often caused conflict in their relationship and would be willing to discuss during the experiment. They were then instructed to discuss these conflict topics in the lab and try to solve the problem or work toward a solution.

Participants filled out questionnaires assessing their anger-hostility and anxiety both before engaging in conflict discussion and after engaging in conflict discussion as well as a questionnaire designed to assess dispositional mindfulness and relationship satisfaction. Mindfulness during the problem discussion was also assessed. For the postconflict discussion questionnaire, participants were asked to think about how they felt about their boyfriend or girlfriend and their relationship right before the conflict discussion, in comparison with how they felt about that person and their relationship after the discussion and then asked to rank perceived change in three main domains: love or commitment, respect given to and received from partner, and degree of felt support and open communication.

Because research indicates that more mindful individuals experience greater relationship satisfaction and individual psychological well-being, college campus mental health specialists can help college students develop mindfulness strategies to become aware of their “in the moment”: thoughts, feelings and behaviors (Michel & Randick, 2014; Barnes et al, 2007). Mindfulness exercises that can easily be taught in individual and group counseling or even large scale workshops are breath awareness, guided meditation, yoga practice, and other exercises designed to increase self control and emotional regulation (Michel & Randick, 2014).

Mindfulness-Based programming can also be implemented, in order to keep mindfulness training more structured.

Researchers have adapted traditional Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs for couples, calling the program Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement (Carson, Carson, Gil, Baucom, 2004). Traditional MBSR was adapted to incorporate a greater focus on facilitating greater appreciation of one's partner, including loving kindness-meditation and mindful touch exercises. Couples were taught how to apply mindfulness to emotion-focused and problem-focused approaches to relationship difficulties. Lastly, couples were encouraged to be more present and incorporate mindfulness during shared pleasant activities, unpleasant activities, stressful interactions, and discuss and keep daily records about new understandings from engaging in mindfulness during these interactions.

This particular program developed by researchers stuck pretty closely to traditional MBSR (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), consisting of eight weekly 150-minute group sessions, a full-day retreat, and provided training in mindfulness methods. Sessions included skills instruction, didactic presentations, couples exercises, group discussions, and relied strongly on homework assignments for skills development. Throughout the program, couples developed and cultivated mindful attention (Carson et al., 2004).

The program actively engaged participants in their learning and taught formal and informal meditation-based methods, including body scan meditation, partner yoga exercises, sitting meditation, and mindfulness during meditation-based methods. Couples also learned about the impact of stress on mental, physical

and relationship health. Group discussions about individual's experiences with mindfulness practice were also facilitated (Carson, et al., 2004).

Couples were also instructed to practice mindfulness at home. Practice was guided by audiotapes and required special set aside time for each partner of about 30 to 45 minutes per day, 6 days per week. Couples were also assigned homework that promoted informal mindfulness techniques practice during daily activities. Researchers found that the Mindfulness Based Relationship Enhancement program was effective in enriching relationship functioning and improving individual psychological well-being. Individuals reported improvements in individual relaxation, acceptance of partner, confidence in ability to cope with stressful situations, and overall functioning. Results were consistent through the 3-month follow-up (Carson, et al., 2004).

Since college students are often very busy, it may not be practical to implement 150 minute weekly sessions on a college campus, but perhaps this program could be adapted to be a semester long program (usually around 15 weeks) that consisted of 60 minute weekly sessions. Further research needs to be conducted to examine adapting Mindfulness Based Relationship Enhancement for college environments and whether shorter sessions spanning for longer periods of time has the same efficacy as more traditional formats.

Mindfulness based interventions aim to help strengthen attentional and emotional coping skills, helping individuals cope with stressful situations that they do not have control over (Viafora, Mathiesen, Unsworth, 2015). Because an individual does not have control over their partner's actions, mindfulness can help

an individual develop skills necessary for dealing with interpersonal stress (Barnes, et al, 2007). Mindfulness Based Relationship Enhancement has proven to be effective in improving well-being for both distressed and non-distressed couples (Barnes et al, 2007; Carson, et al., 2004).

Mindfulness programs are primarily skills-based and psycho-educational in nature, seeming to be a good fit for college campuses. Mindfulness based programs easily address many of student's chief relationship complaints. Communication and conflict manage skills could easily be incorporated into the psycho-educational component of Mindfulness Based Relationship Enhancement. Further more, the acceptance skills taught in mindfulness have been proven to be effective in helping students cope with interpersonal stress and better regulate negative emotions such as jealousy.

Targeting Breakup Distress

Lastly, to target breakup distress, mental health practitioners can help students come to terms and cope with their loss by using forms of therapy that have been used to work with individuals with complicated grief (Fields et al., 2009). While treatment has yet to be specifically tailored for working with individuals who are mourning the loss of a relationship, several therapies have been shown to be effective with treating depression associated with complicated grief such Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds, 2005; Fields et al., 2009).

Interpersonal Psychotherapy is a time-limited psychotherapy that is usually used in the treatment of major depressive disorder (Weissman, 2006; Markowitz &

Weissman, 2012). IPT focuses on interpersonal relationships, with the basic assumption that mechanisms for depression can be cyclical and related to individual's social and interpersonal relationships. Depression may be triggered by problems in human relationships and in turn, when an individual is depressed, they may experience further problems in close relationships (Weissman, 2006; Markowitz & Weissman, 2012). IPT usually focuses on one or two of four interpersonal problem areas. These areas are role transition (a major life change), grief (problems coming to terms with a loss of a loved one, usually in terms of death), interpersonal dispute (conflict with a significant other), and social skills (lack social skills to develop and maintain ongoing relationships with others).

Manualized IPT for depression is usually conducted over sixteen sessions (Klerman, Weissman, Rounsaville, & Chevron, 1984). Throughout the sessions, individuals are educated about depression and its treatment and the therapist gains a sense of the individual's important personal relationships, gaining more insight on positive and negative aspects, and what the individual may want to change in these relationships. Techniques used in IPT include role-playing, communication analysis, and use of content and process affect.

Interpersonal therapy can help individuals arrive at more realistic assessments of relationships with a loss of a loved one, in the case of breakup distress, the former partner. IPT helps individuals address both positive and negative aspects of the former relationships. When used to treat complicated grief symptoms, IPT has found significantly reduce symptoms (Stroebe & Shut, 1999; Field et al. 2009).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) helps individuals realize the relationship between their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Beck, 2011). From a CBT orientation, individuals are taught that dysfunctional thinking can have negative effects on their moods. Individuals learn how to evaluate their thinking in more realistic and adaptive ways.

Complicated Grief Therapy is a treatment that modifies IPT techniques to include CBT techniques to target intrusive thoughts and images, avoidance behaviors, and intense feelings of longing (Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds, 2005). CGT addresses symptoms specific to complicated grief by retelling the story of loss (Field et al., 2009). This technique is called revisiting and is similar to procedures used for in vivo exposures typically used to treat Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds, 2005). When coping with death of a loved one, the therapist asks clients to close their eyes and tell the story of death, tape recording the story and periodically asking the client to report distress levels. The client is then asked to listen to the tape at home, during the week. Distress related to loss, such as yearning and longing, fears of being alone, are targeted using techniques.

Therapy may also involve imaginal conversations with the deceased and completion of a set of memories questionnaires that focus on both positive and negative memories (Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds, 2005). Clients are also asked to set goals for themselves and determine what it would be like for them if their grief were not so intense (Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds, 2005).

In a study that compared the efficacy of Complicated Grief Therapy with standard Interpersonal Therapy, researchers found that individuals responded

better to CGT, with rate of response to CGT being greater than that of IPT (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Additionally, response time to CGT was shorter. A randomized control trial comparing CGT and IPT found similar results (Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds, 2005).

Given that breakup distress can take the form of complicated grief, research needs to be conducted in adapting Complicated Grief Therapy for individuals who are experiencing breakup distress (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010). If shown to be effective in treating symptoms specific to breakup distress, mental health specialists working with college students who have just experienced a breakup, may want to use a CGT orientation to best help students cope with the feelings of grief and loss.

For Future Research

While interpersonal conflict has been associated with decreased academic achievement and motivation and increased likelihood of dropping out of school, most research has been conducted with children or in the context of teacher-student relationships (Ames, 1992; Arsenio & Loria, 2014; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000; Hamrey & Pianta, 2001). Other studies have examined perceived effects of interpersonal stress on academic performance rather than actual academic performance itself (Field, et al., 2012).

Further research should be conducted with college students and focus on relationships outside of the classroom. Given that romantic stress can have such an impact on an individual's functioning and well-being, researchers should examine the relationship between stress arising from romantic relationships and academic performance. Stress experienced in other relationships such as peer, roommate, and

family can also be studied (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999). This report focused primarily on interventions that can be used with students to foster healthy romantic relationships and alleviate stress experienced in romantic relationships. Further research needs to be conducted to encompass counseling implications for working with students who are experiencing interpersonal stress in non-romantic relationships as well.

Additionally, in thinking about most effective and feasible interventions to implement on college campuses to best help students cope with interpersonal stress, more research needs to be done to compare efficacy of different orientations. Traditional Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction has been adapted to include a cognitive component. Mindfulness Based Cognitive therapy (MBCT) has been shown to be effective in working with individuals with depression, reducing symptoms of depression and likelihood of relapse (Williams, Russell, & Russell, 2008). Given that both MBCT and Complicated Grief Therapy, incorporate cognitive components into existing therapeutic frameworks, to specifically target symptoms of depression, it would be interesting to compare the efficacy of MBCT and CGT in treating individuals with symptoms of breakup distress.

Lastly, while this report focused mainly on mindfulness and interpersonal psychotherapy based programs, a therapy called Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) has also been used to enhance relationship satisfaction in couples (Stavrianaopoulous, 2014). EFT operates under the assumption that issues between partners have more to do with emotional distance than conflict or control (Johnson, 1996; Johnson, 2004). The therapy focuses on challenging attachment behaviors, in

order to enhance relationship satisfaction. In a curriculum adapted for college couples, both male and female participants reported higher relationship satisfaction upon participating in the program (Stavrianapolous, 2014). Couples reported increases in trust and decrease in depressive symptoms (Stavrianaopolous, 2014). More research needs to be done in comparing efficacy between Emotionally Focused Therapy, Mindfulness Based Relationship Enhancement, and Interpersonal Psychotherapy programs.

Conclusions

When asked why students attend college, the most frequently cited answer by college freshman is to obtain education that can help them get a better job and higher pay (Post Secondary Education Opportunity, 1993). The second most frequently cited reason is purely educational, pertaining to goals like learning more about things, gaining a general education, to prepare for graduate or professional school, and become a more cultured person. Given that interpersonal stress can increase symptoms of depression and anxiety, which can in turn affect focus and motivation, negatively impacting academic performance, helping students cope with interpersonal stress in a healthy manner should be a priority.

While interpersonal stress has been shown to have detrimental effects on both physical and mental health, research indicates that college students in committed relationships with high relationship satisfaction experience fewer mental health and substance abuse problems (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010). Research also indicates that these effects carry over to married individuals

(Salvatore, Collins, & Simpson, 2012; Neff, 2012). Married individuals who report being in a happy, committed relationships, live longer, healthier lives.

College students are at a crucial age where they are developing general life skills to help them become more self-sufficient and personally responsible (Arnett, 2003). In regards to relationship skills specifically, research shows that helping college student couples heighten awareness in current relationship patterns, enhances ability to form more positive, secure, long-lasting relationships later in life (Creasy, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). Offering relationship enhancement programs on campus have the potential to improve not only current well-being and psychological functioning of college students, but also life long well-being and functioning (Stavrianopoulous, 2015). Therefore it is important to equip college students with the necessary skills and coping strategies to develop healthy, flourishing interpersonal relationships, and effectively manage interpersonal stress.

This report detailed the effects of interpersonal stress and more specifically romantic stress. Interpersonal stress has been linked to general life dissatisfaction, depression, distress, and anxiety (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997; Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982; Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). There is evidence that interpersonal stress experienced in the context of a romantic relationship may have a particularly severe impact on mental health and well-being. This is due to interdependent nature of romantic relationships and intense emotion associated with an intimate relationship (Vangesti, 2007).

Most cited reasons for relationship troubles stem from issues with communication, feelings of jealousy, and perceived differences in how much one

partner invests in the relationship (Zusman & Knox, 1998; Darling et al., 2007; Murray, 1999). Given that mindfulness based programming can adequately address these complaints, equipping students with skills that can help students better cope with relationship problems, regulate emotions, this report makes an argument that Mindfulness Based Relationship Enhancement should be implemented on college campuses, in both a group and individual format. When an individual assesses that they have the necessary resources to cope with a threatening situation, they will not interpret the situation as stressful in the first place, instead perceiving the situation as manageable. Therefore, equipping students with mindful coping skills, will not only help cope with existing stressors, but should also decrease likelihood that future threatening situations will be perceived as stressful, initially.

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