

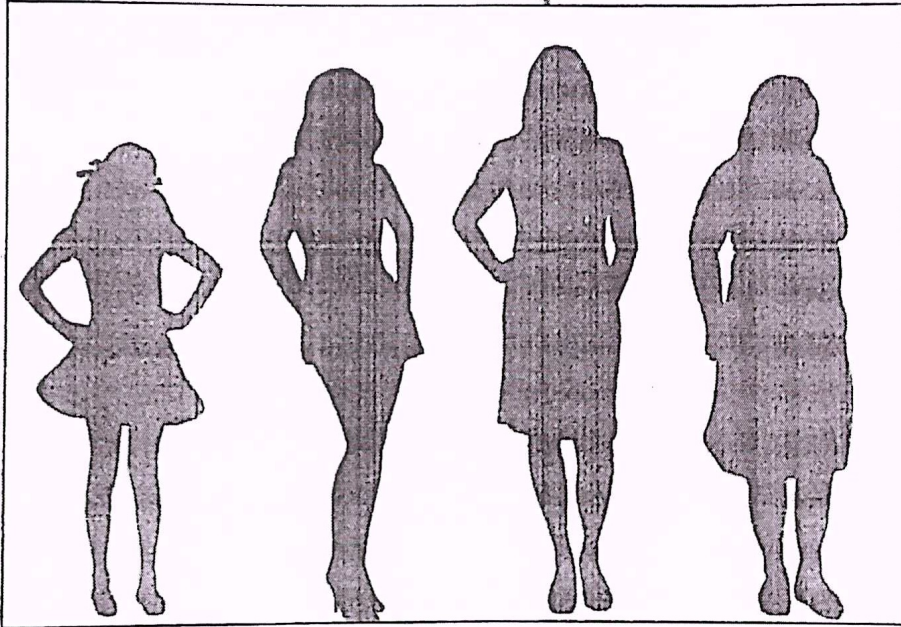
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26. Stress and the Adolescent Girls

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Abstract

Adolescent girls may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of stress. Compared to adolescent boys, girls report more stress and show more negative reactivity to stress. Stress during adolescence may contribute to the large portion of females affected by autoimmune disorders in early adulthood and chronic symptoms such as headaches. Due to processing stress differently than males, female adolescents are far more vulnerable to the negative impacts of stress, such as depression and anxiety which adversely affects their mental and physical health.

Keywords: Stress, Adolescent, Girls, Health

Although a great deal of research has measured stressful life events and stress-related symptoms in adolescents, little research has qualitatively examined the experience of stress in teens. The purpose of this study is to explore how teen girls experience stress. The mind full of stress, emotionally shutting out others, and "growing out of it." The overarching finding was that all teen girls described anger in relation to stress. Most concerning was the predominant theme of a lack of agency in relation to affecting change or management of stress in their lives.

Adolescent girls may even be more vulnerable to the negative effects of stress. Compared to adolescent boys, girls report more stress and show more negative reactivity to stress. Stress during adolescence may contribute to the large portion of females affected by autoimmune disorders in early adulthood and chronic symptoms such as headaches. Due to processing stress differently than males, female adolescents are far more vulnerable to the negative impacts of stress, such as depression and anxiety which adversely affects their mental and physical health.

Understanding stress in adolescents may be complicated by the use of multiple meanings of the term "stress" in health-related research. In the adolescent literature, stress is conceptualized and operationalized broadly, including concepts such as anxiety and feeling hassled. Adolescent stressors have been described as being teased or getting in an argument or the experience of stressful life events. The broad range of definitions and operations of the term "stress" weakens the internal and external validity of the concept. Historically and more



generally, stress has been endowed with multiple meanings and uses: anecdotally, clinically, and in stress research. Pointed out that, despite scholarly focus on the concept of stress, it remains ambiguous and poorly defined. A major difficulty in defining stress results from multiple contextual meanings within and across individuals.

The experience of stress is characterized by three primary themes: the mind of stress, the feeling of stress, and the body of stress. The mind of stress: The mind of stress primary theme encompassed four distinct supporting themes, which are related to cognitive and psychological reactions the teens noticed during times of stress. The mind of stress includes the supporting themes of having too much to do, can't stop thinking, exaggerated response to the stressor, and difficulty concentrating. Most of the teen girls describe feelings of being overwhelmed or having too much to do as their experiences of stress. They describe struggles to complete homework on time and to balance extracurricular activities and required schoolwork. The teens also describe a lack of time for more pleasurable activities as a result of having too much to do.

The teens talk about the various ways they noticed their stress and many times they describe it as a difficulty in concentration. Therefore, examples of the supporting theme difficulty concentrating included "I end up forgetting stuff a lot when I'm stressed out" and "it's hard to focus on like just one thing or another. It's hard to concentrate or something." The following is a more explicit example of this supporting theme, which shows the overlap between stress, concentration, and anger: "When I can't concentrate or when I'm over-heated, or when I'm angry, that's when I think I feel stressed, and I can't really concentrate on my environment or surroundings" (15-year-old). In this particular example, the teen described not only a mental component of stress, but also an emotional component—anger. Anger is a very common theme for these teens

For several individuals, anger overlap or precedes feelings of sadness, and for others the overlap between sadness and anger is almost indistinguishable. Feelings of frustration are also commonly described. Most of the teens describe frustration in relation to schoolwork and tests. Several teens suggest that the lack of overwhelming homework inevitably led to unavoidable frustration. Freaking out is another supporting theme under the feelings of stress and includes teens' descriptions of anxiety, nervousness, worry, and panic. Overall the teens are very articulate in their descriptions of the emotions they experience during stress.

The third primary theme under the experience of stress category is the body of stress. This primary theme includes the supporting themes: headaches indicating stress, tension, feeling sick, and being tired.



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Headaches were also described as a result of school-related events such as homework. In addition to headaches, the girls describe physical experiences of stress as "tension," "making me sick," and "being tired." The supporting theme of tension mainly includes muscular tension when the teens describe their experience of stress: Three primary themes are identified as the teen's response to stress: calming down/slowing down, talking about stress, and escape. Some of the teens describe their efforts to counteract their stress by calming themselves down. These girls describe responses such as eating, exercising, and deep breathing as methods to calm down.

The third supporting theme for escape is emotionally shutting out others. Some teens describe their former coping skills as physically shutting out her mother, and now they have learned to do this emotionally.

The teens' responses or methods of coping with stress were to calm down, talk to others, or escape through distraction or avoidance. Calming down/slowing down is the least common supporting theme. The teens talk about many examples of environments or situations that cause stress for them. Most of the reported causes are related to school and relationships.

Several of the girls who discuss the stress of meeting expectations also describe the expectations as being far beyond their reach, such as the amount of work they could do in a given time or the number of tasks they could manage at one time. Typically, their description of meeting expectations was one of an inability to perform as expected and therefore a sense of hopelessness.

A final category, adaptation, was utilized in order to capture the teens' discussions of former stressors that were no longer stressful. The teens discussed a myriad of previously stressful situations most of which fell into two primary themes; growing out of it and doesn't bother me anymore. The teens describe many examples of stressors they had overcome. Most of these examples consisted of "learning to fit in." These were examples of past social stresses, typically in middle school or early high school, and were examples of not fitting in with their peers.

The teens often position themselves as unable to affect change in relation to stress and describe stress as an external and unavoidable force. In addition, they describe their internal physical and emotional reactions to stress as out of their control. Although this theme of helplessness was not articulated often. It's like when you're just really uneasy and you're worried and you don't know what's gonna happen. So ... nothing you can do at the moment.



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The teens often position themselves as unable to affect change in relation to stress and describe stress as an external and unavoidable force. In addition, they describe their internal physical and emotional reactions to stress as out of their control. Although this theme of helplessness was not articulated often. It's like when you're just really uneasy and you're worried and you don't know what's gonna happen. So it's like—you just feel like there's nothing you can do at the moment. So it's like--it's just overwhelming. Like you just feel overwhelmed with stuff that you can't control. So it's like no matter what you do you can't affect what's gonna happen. So it's just like something that's just constantly bothering you.



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Without any sense of agency in relation to stress, it is understandable that these girls did not articulate having learned strategies or techniques to help them manage stress. The use of avoidant coping strategies has been associated with behavioral and psychological problems. Further supporting the meta theme of lacking agency, the teens' descriptions of stress implied perceiving themselves as victims of the stress in their lives. All of the teens mentioned disliking the negative effects of stress, but none described a desire to initiate change or strategies to manage stress. Feeling powerless in relation to stress during the formative, adolescent years may contribute to learned helplessness.

Several teens describe some difficulty in thinking and talking about stress. For instance, some of the teens mention that they had not previously thought much about the ways in which stress affected them physically or emotionally. This may have been due to an unfamiliarity with discussing stress. Stress in adolescent health literature is often measured and discussed using related concepts such as anxiety, irritability, and a lack of control. Though these concepts do appear to be related, the narratives of stress in female girls illustrate stress as far more complex, involving emotional, physical, and social domains of their lives. Although limited due to the small sample size, this study provides preliminary evidence for an association between stress and negative emotions such as anger in adolescent girls. In addition, data from this preliminary study suggests a concerning lack of agency in relation to addressing or managing stress. The combined effect of negative emotions associated with stress and a lack of agency in managing stress potentially increases the girls' vulnerability to the negative impacts of stress and stress-related illness. Given the fragility of adolescent neurodevelopment and the likelihood of stressful experiences to contribute to psychopathology, it is imperative to further understand how anger is related to stress in adolescent girls. Therefore, these concepts warrant further investigation in an effort to promote the healthy development of adolescent girls.

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