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Research Article

The Association Between Perceived Stress and Quality of Life in University Students: The Parallel Mediating Role of Depressive Symptoms and Health-Promoting Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examined whether depressive symptoms and health-promoting lifestyle behaviors mediate the association between perceived stress and quality of life (QoL) in university students.
Methods: Using a cross-sectional survey, Korean university students (N = 187, M_{age} = 23.97 years; 54.0% female) completed structured questionnaires with psychometric adequacy. A parallel multiple mediation model was used to test the mediating effect of depressive symptoms and health-promoting lifestyle behaviors on the relationship between perceived stress and QoL.
Results: Total effect of perceived stress, depressive symptoms, and health-promoting lifestyle behaviors on QoL was −.55. Of these, total indirect mediating effect was −.50, whereas direct effect was only −.05 in the parallel mediation model. In particular, depressive symptoms (indirect effect = −.32) and health-promoting lifestyle behaviors (indirect effect = −.18) completely mediated the relationship between perceived stress and QoL.
Conclusions: The results suggest that effective strategies primarily focusing on improving depressive symptoms along with health behaviors are needed to decrease the negative effect of perceived stress on QoL.
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Introduction

University students experience an important developmental transition from adolescence to adulthood. Many stressors such as adaptation to university life, maintaining good grades, future planning, and attempting to live independently from their parents can often contribute to health problems for university students [1]. The impact of stress is different for individuals depending on whether their response to stressor is negative or positive and how they recognize their stress [2]. This perceived stress may affect both physiological and psychological health negatively and lead to decline in the quality of life (QoL) of university students [2,3].

The QoL is the general well-being of individuals and societies and is associated with a wide range of contexts; it often includes physical, psychological, social relationships, and environmental aspects [4]. In previous studies regarding perceived stress and QoL among university students, perceived stress was negatively correlated with QoL [5,6]. Furthermore, a recent systematic review of 13 studies highlighted that perceived stress and QoL showed a significant negative association in university students and that continuous perceived stress had effects that went beyond health commitment and QoL [7].

In general, health-promoting behaviors have been found to be associated with enhanced QoL in university students [8]. However, many university students tend to have low awareness of the importance of these health-promoting behaviors during this developmental period and are unaware that unhealthy practices or habits persist into adulthood, causing later-life health concerns [9].

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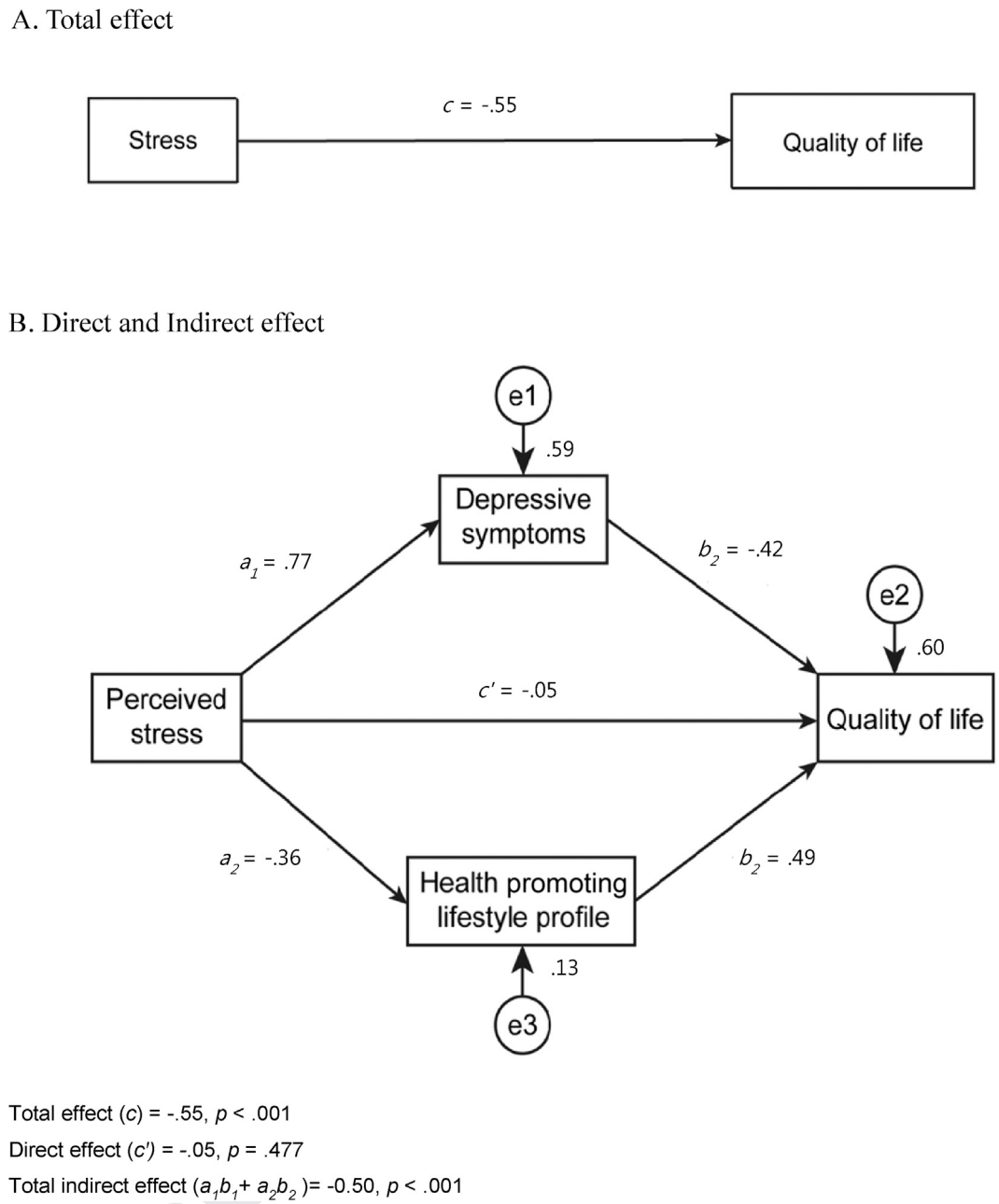

Figure 1. A statistical diagram of the parallel multiple mediator model with standardized coefficients (β) for the quality of life among university students (N = 187).

In addition, low adherence to healthy lifestyle behaviors is associated with decreased psychological well-being and QoL in university students [8]. Previous researchers have primarily focused on individual health behavior rather than university students' overall behaviors and lifestyle factors [8,10]. Notably, the health-promoting lifestyle profile (HPLP) was often used to evaluate students' overall lifestyles, including physical activity, nutrition, stress management, interpersonal relations, health responsibility, and spiritual growth [11]. Therefore, overall health behaviors using the HPLP scale requires attention, which may allow for the identification of comprehensive lifestyle factors.

A common prevalent psychological health change is the development of depressive symptoms among university students. A systematic review of 24 studies from diverse countries presented an average depression prevalence of 30.6% among university students [12]. High levels of depressive symptoms in university students are negatively correlated with QoL; those having depressive symptoms show multi-dimensional impairments in QoL [13]. Depressive symptoms in early adulthood can affect career and social relations in the future; negative experiences accumulate over one's life and can adversely impact QoL later in life [12,14]. Thus, successful management of depressive symptoms along with stress may play a leading role in improving QoL of the students.

Nevertheless, previous works did not present the mechanisms of depressive symptoms and health behaviors simultaneously on the relationship between perceived stress and QoL but provided their specific relation. Both increased health behaviors and lower levels of depressive symptoms are associated with improved QoL in Western and Eastern countries [15]. In addition, stress is involved in health risk behaviors and further influences health conditions among university students [10]. In the study with Taiwanese

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