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What factors are related to self-perceived health? The relationship between Sense of Coherence, behaviors and health on Peruvian emerging adults[☆]

¿Qué factores se relacionan con la salud percibida? La relación entre Sentido de Coherencia, conductas y salud en adultos emergentes peruanos

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to assess the relationship between Sense of Coherence (SOC), health behaviors and self-perceived physical and mental health in men and women. 448 undergraduate students participated in this study. The mean age was 21.3 years old ($SD = 1.95$). SOC, leisure time and sleep predicted better mental health in men. Comprehensibility, leisure time, sleep and physical activity predicted physical health in men. Only manageability and meaningfulness predicted mental health in women. In this group, Manageability, leisure time, physical activity and diet predicted physical health. These results can be used to help design strategies to encourage the adoption of healthy behaviors and healthier coping strategies in late adolescents and emerging adults.

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Keywords: Sense of Coherence; Emerging adults; College students; Mental and physical health

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue evaluar la relación entre el sentido de coherencia (SOC), las conductas de salud y la percepción de salud física y mental en varones y mujeres peruanas. Cuatrocientos cuarenta y ocho estudiantes universitarios participaron en este estudio. La media de edad de los estudiantes fue de 21.3 años ($DE = 1.95$), el manejo del tiempo libre y el sueño predijeron mejor la salud mental en los varones. Comprensibilidad, tiempo libre, sueño y actividad física predijeron salud física en los varones. Solo la manejabilidad y la significatividad predijeron la salud mental en las mujeres. En este mismo grupo, la manejabilidad, el tiempo libre, la actividad física y la dieta predijeron la salud física. Estos resultados pueden ser utilizados para diseñar estrategias que promuevan la adopción de conductas y estrategias de afrontamiento más saludables en adolescentes tardíos y adultos emergentes.

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Palabras clave: Sentido de coherencia; Adultos emergentes; Estudiantes universitarios; Conductas de salud y salud mental y física

Many years ago, the American Sociologist Aaron Antonovsky presented the Sense of Coherence concept as a coping skill that would enhance psychological and physical

health (Antonovsky, 1988). Several years have passed since those days and research in Sense of Coherence has dramatically increased. A great variety of findings have argued that there is a strong relationship between mental health and Sense of Coherence (Eriksson & Lidstrom, 2006; Flensburg-Madsen, Ventegodt, & Merrick, 2005; Palacios-Espinosa & Restrepo-Espinosa, 2008). In spite of this, the same results have not been assessed regarding physical health. Studies have presented

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mixed results concerning the relationship of Sense of Coherence and physical health. Some authors argue that there is a strong relationship between physical health and Sense of Coherence, as opposed to other authors that do not find these results and even argue that a new scale should be assessed (Flensburg-Madsen, Ventegodt, & Merrick, 2006).

Antonovsky (1988) defined Sense of Coherence (SOC) as follows:

“a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that: (a) the stimuli deriving from one’s internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable; (b) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (c) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement” (p. 19).

SOC has three components that play an important role as a stress buffer: Comprehensibility, Manageability and Meaningfulness. Comprehensibility is the ability to classify the information from the atmosphere and give a cognitive meaning to stimulus, which derives out of internal and external stimuli. Manageability describes how capable and what resources the person has in order to cope with a difficult setting. Meaningfulness is the ability to give emotional meaning to the environment. This helps people to be motivated and consider highly stressful situations as interesting and challenging (Antonovsky, 1990).

Sense of Coherence has been studied in many different types of populations all around the world (Eriksson & Lindstrom, 2005). In spite of this, it has captivated relatively little attention on young people (Rivera, García-Moya, Moreno, & Ramos, 2012).

It is interesting to note that in the world, the vast majority of people are between 15 and 39 years of age (IMF, 2014). In a particular case, in Peru it is projected that in 2015, the vast majority of people will be between 15 and 29 years old which are adolescents and emerging adults (INEI, 2010). Due to economic and demographic reasons competition for a job had become harder, there are more persons economically active and the growth of the working force has increased steadily through the years from 36 095 thousand people in 2002 to 45 942 people in 2013, also more people are starting undergraduate training to get a bachelor. The amount of people studying is increasing throughout the years, for example from 2012 to 2013, there was an increase of 5.6% (60 900 people), from one year to another (INEI, 2014). Chau and Van den Broucke (2005) found out that, late adolescents and emerging adults experienced university and academic life stressors due to the increased responsibility and pressure of achieving good grades.

For several reasons all the challenges late adolescents and emerging adults have to face increases their probability of being at risk, and three of the most important ones are the following. The first reason is on a developmental level; this population has to face difficult tasks as a result of maturation. Physical and emotional changes transform the way they have to relate with peers and family. Moreover, this period is marked by an increase in psychological autonomy that is related to making own inde-

pendent decisions, which could influence on their health (Currie et al., 2010).

Self-perceived health is the subjective perception of how healthy physically and mentally a person feels. The person could feel healthy but when he or she is evaluated by a doctor finds out that is not. Besides, a person could not feel any physical discomfort but regardless of that does not feel healthy (Schwartzmann, 2003).

The second reason, is on a physical and mental symptomatology level, some studies have found out that, anxiety, depression, somatic symptoms, eating disorders, and suicide ideation and suicide attempts among others psychiatric disorders, have also been reported (Caballero, Abello, & Palacio, 2007).

The third reason is on an academic level, heavy workload and responsibilities tend to translate into academic stress and mental health symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, restlessness and anxiety, which might translate for example into nail biting (Barraza & Silerio, 2007). In spite all of these possible symptoms, as a result of age this group tends to overestimate their perception of health and think they have great health or “*health of steel*” (OMS, 2006).

Many late adolescents and emerging adults tend to have a good self perceived health but that does not mean they practice healthy behaviors. Many of them do not practice sufficient physical activity, eat healthy diets or have an appropriate sleep quality (Arrivillaga, Salazar, & Correa, 2003). Similarly, they also tend to suffer from irregular sleeping patterns, 55.1% of them have complained of change in their sleeping patterns and 49.5% have felt tired the majority of the time (SENAJU, 2011). Another study with 5993 people found that 36.18% of them smoked tobacco, 71.7% drank alcohol within the last year and 22.03% had a risky drinking pattern (CAN, 2013).

Findings have also shown that health behaviors have proved to have an impact on subjective well being. It is possible that these conducts could increase the probability of a detriment in academic performance and lead to dropout (Davis & Brantley, 2004).

This situation shows the need to assess variables that could enhance healthier behaviors, diminish stress and increase perception of health. In that regard, Sense of Coherence has proved to be a reliable asset to improve mental health, health state and self-rated health (Eriksson & Lidstrom, 2006), and also increase healthy practices such as healthier diets, less smoking and more physical activity (Wainright et al., 2007). Overall, a strong SOC has a universal positive association with health behaviors and subjective health measures (Savolainen et al., 2009). Therefore, the aim of this study is to assess the relationship between Comprehensibility, Manageability and Meaningfulness, health behaviors and self-perceived physical and mental health in Peruvian men and women.

Method

Participants

A cross-sectional study was carried out with a sample of 448 Peruvian undergraduate students. 262 of the participants

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