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Stress, coping and emotional and behavioral problems among German high school students



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ABSTRACT

This research tests a mediator-model of stress, coping and emotional/behavioral problems. The sample comprises 350 adolescents in the penultimate year of high school. Higher levels of overall stress as well as those related to school and future, the most problematic domains, were associated with more emotional/behavioral problems. The association was partially mediated through withdrawal. The proportion of the indirect effect was higher in the school-specific compared to the future-related or overall model. Future research on successful transitions from school should focus on stress, particularly with school and future, and pay attention to specifics of withdrawal in each context.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The transition from high school to job or postsecondary education

The transition from school to job or postsecondary education can pose a critical period during adolescence. During their last years of school, pupils need to come to a decision on their academic and/or vocational career and acquire necessary qualifications. This development takes place within the broader societal context, which nowadays involves shortened durations of schooling and study as well as an increasingly complex labor market. On the individual level, it is encountered amidst further developmental tasks like forming relationships and identity. This

high load may result in stress. In a study of first-year high school students, one third of participants experienced symptoms of stress like exhaustion, tension and difficulties concentrating. The level of stress was regarded as chronic in 8.2% of the pupils (Schraml, Perski, Grossi, & Simonsson-Sarnecki, 2011).

1.2. Stress as a risk factor for adolescent development

Stress is most frequently defined according to the transactional model. Lazarus and Launier (1981) describe it as a relational concept, in which a person needs to balance demands and her or his abilities to meet these demands. It can have detrimental effects on pupils' mental health. Experiencing a higher load of stressors correlates with experiencing a higher amount of both internalizing and externalizing symptoms during adolescence (Grant et al., 2003). Longitudinal studies show that a change in symptoms is predicted by the experience of stressful situations over and above previous symptoms. This proves that stress can contribute to maladaptation (Grant, Compas, Thurm, McMahon, & Gipson, 2004). Not only is stress relevant for psychological development during adolescence, it also negatively affects school careers and vocational health in young adulthood (Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014). The successful transition from adolescence to adulthood in other words is likely to be fostered by competences in dealing with stress. Within the concept of

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coping such competences have been shown to mediate the association of stress and adaptation (Grant et al., 2006). Coping might therefore be of particular relevance in understanding and improving adolescent development during this transition.

1.3. Coping and psychological adaptation

Coping is defined as the “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A vast body of literature indicates that different ways of coping differently affect adaptation (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001; Grant et al., 2006). One may roughly summarize that engagement coping and problem-focused coping are associated with better, disengagement and emotion-focused coping with less psychological adjustment (Compas et al., 2001; Evans et al., 2015; Ng & Hurry, 2011; Seiffge-Krenke, 2011). Still, there is substantial heterogeneity in findings with only half of the studies leading to significant results (Compas et al., 2001; Grant et al., 2006). One explanation for the inconsistencies is that coping, as well as its effects on psychological adjustment seem to vary across stressors (Compas et al., 2001; Seiffge-Krenke, 2011; Seiffge-Krenke, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2009). Therefore, if coping is considered as a starting point for interventions, its association with stress and psychological adaptation should be verified in the context of interest.

1.4. Coping with everyday stress and psychological adaptation

Research on the role of coping in the association between stress and psychological adjustment has usually focused on traumatic events (Evans et al., 2015; Zhang, Liu, Jiang, Wu, & Tian, 2014). However, minor stressors including school-related problems have also been found to be detrimental for adolescent development (e.g. Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, & Swanson, 2009; Grant et al., 2004; Murberg & Bru, 2005). Assessing minor stressors may capture the normative challenges of the last years of secondary education best. In light of the depicted research, a multidimensional model of coping with everyday stressors was chosen for the present study (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). It postulates three types of coping, which are measured across a variety of different stressors. *Active coping* implies approaching the problem or stressful experience and acting on the circumstances. The scale encompasses strategies of seeking formal and informal advice or emotional assistance from parents or friends as well as discussions in order to solve a problem. *Internal coping* consists of cognitive strategies which approach the problem (considering possible solutions and making compromises) but also of strategies that imply adaptation to the environment (e.g. acceptance, recognition of one's own limitations, anticipation of the worst case, distraction). *Withdrawal* from the stressor poses the third form of coping. It includes avoidance of problematic situations or emotions, also using drugs and alcohol, resignation as well as seeking intense emotional outlet by screaming, crying, listening to loud music or physical activity. A comparison of the strategies subsumed within the scales and the systematization of findings on engagement coping/problem solving and psychopathology in Compas et al. (2001) suggests that active and internal coping impact adolescent development likewise. Equally, withdrawal can be expected to contribute to poorer adjustment as was observed for disengagement and emotional coping. These assumptions are supported by factor analyses which derived a two-factor solution for the multidimensional model (Herman-Stahl, Stemmler, & Petersen, 1995). Active and internal strategies loaded on a common factor, which was labeled approach-oriented coping, whereas withdrawal strategies solely loaded on a second factor, which was termed avoidance coping.

1.5. Aim of the study

The present study aims at testing the association of stress and adjustment with coping as a potential mediator. This shall be done in the context of the transition from school to job or post-secondary education. We target a sample of adolescents in Year 11, the penultimate year of German high school. Based on the previous research, we formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The higher the amount of everyday stress reported by the adolescents, the more emotional and behavioral problems they will indicate.

Hypothesis 2. Coping mediates the association between everyday stress and emotional and behavioral problems. We hypothesized a mediation of the association between stress and emotional/behavioral problems through lower levels of active and internal coping (2a) and through higher levels of withdrawal coping (2b).

As some studies demonstrate gender effects on the association between stress, coping and psychopathology (Grant et al., 2006), we investigated whether associations differ according to gender.

Subsequently, an exploratory analysis was conducted in order to determine which domains of everyday life are experienced as most troublesome. It was then inspected whether the assumptions tested on coping with stress across situations apply to coping with these stressful domains in particular.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Participants were recruited in four grammar schools in Heidelberg. All pupils in year 11 were addressed. Sampling and data collection were part of a randomized controlled trial on a cognitive-behavioral stress management training. The present analysis is based on the baseline data. 350 out of 427 students decided to participate, leading to an attendance rate of 82.0%. The remaining 18.0% of potential study participants either were not present at the day of data collection or refused participation. Even if not participating, all students had to stay inside the classroom during assessment.

2.2. Procedure

Approval of the local ethics committee was obtained before recruitment. Parents received written information on the study and had the opportunity to refuse their child's participation (opt-out approach). A written informed consent by students was obtained before baseline assessment. Pupils were administered paper-pencil questionnaires in the classrooms and supervised by members of the research team. Completing the survey took about 60 min.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Stress

Stress was assessed with the German version of the *Problem Questionnaire* (PQ; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995), a self-report instrument on minor stressors in the domains school, future, parents, peers, leisure time, romantic relations and self. Adolescents were asked to indicate the stressfulness of 64 problems typical for adolescence on a scale from 1 *not stressful at all* to 5 *highly stressful*. Examples are ‘There is great pressure to get the best marks at school’ (school), ‘I would like very much to discover my real interests’ (future), ‘I fight with my parents because my opinions about many things differ from

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