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# Learning to cope with anxiety: Long-term links from adolescence to adult career satisfaction

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the long-term effect of anxiety on career satisfaction for young adults in the United States. The abilities to positively cope with stress and function competently as an adult were examined as potential moderators of this link, and adolescent developmental precursors of these abilities were also investigated. Analyses revealed a negative association between anxiety at age 21 and career satisfaction at age 27. However, this association was ameliorated for youth with better coping skills and functional competence at age 24. Autonomy and relatedness behaviors with best friends and mothers were examined as potential predictors of these moderators, with positive autonomy and relatedness from friends at age 13 emerging as the sole predictor of these skills. Results suggest that although anxiety may inhibit career satisfaction for many youth, positive coping and adult functional competence skills may allow anxious individuals to achieve career satisfaction. Moreover, these skills may be promoted through peer relationships in early adolescence.

In nearly all educational, training, and work environments, young adults are tasked with handling varying amounts of responsibility and interacting effectively with other people. Thus, some of the most important skills that individuals must have in order to be successful in pursuit of their careers are the ability to communicate effectively with others and to handle the stresses of their current position (Bryen, Potts, & Carey, 2007; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007). High levels of anxiety can interfere with both of these abilities, rendering individuals less effective in and as less satisfied with their current professional role (Moitra, Beard, Weisberg, & Keller, 2011). And yet, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety is extremely prevalent among U.S. adults, affecting 18.1%–30% of adults in the United States (Anxiety Disorder General Statistics, 2015). This suggests, however, that many individuals likely learn ways to successfully cope with anxiety in order to effectively pursue their career goals. Little research, however, has been done to examine what characteristics or abilities might promote positive career outcomes for young adults with anxiety. Thus, this study aims to examine two possible sets of skills, positive emotional coping and adult functional competence, that might explain why some individuals are able to cope with anxiety successfully in the context of their careers whereas others are not. Moreover, it seeks to investigate potential developmental precursors to such skills during early adolescence to better understand how these skills might be promoted before adulthood, thus possibly preventing anxiety from interfering with individuals' long-term career goals.

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## 1. Significance of career satisfaction

A career is an occupation or profession that involves a continuous process of learning and development. It includes goals and opportunities for advancement, and is pursued with a sense of purpose and meaning. A career is typically viewed as a sequence of educational and training experiences, as well as of related jobs, in a particular profession that constitutes an individual's life work. Any one particular job that an individual chooses to work, then, may or may not be related to one's overall career development. It is possible to work a job that is aligned with one's larger career goals and brings great satisfaction, but also possible to work a job that is unrelated to one's career ambitions or brings little satisfaction. Although job satisfaction speaks to an individual's fulfillment at one point in time with regard to a specific job, career satisfaction considers all of the steps (i.e. education, training, previous jobs, current job) that comprise the complete career arc, and is not tied exclusively to whether or not an individual is currently employed or satisfied with their current job. Nevertheless, although the focus of the present study is on examining predictors of career satisfaction, literature examining both career and job satisfaction is reviewed since job satisfaction is typically strongly correlated with career satisfaction (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 1999).

Career satisfaction is a critical outcome related to adult functioning because it is not only linked to feelings about work, but also has important broader implications for physical and mental health. For example, individuals who are satisfied with their careers, whether as a homemaker or as an employee, have significantly better self-reported health, fewer chronic health conditions, fewer day-to-day health problems, and better every day moods as compared to those who are not satisfied (Verbrugge, 1982). More recent work has re-affirmed these initial findings. A large scale meta-analysis examining the health of over 250,000 employees found that low levels of job satisfaction were strongly correlated with lower levels of subjective physical health (Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005). Moreover, even stronger associations were found between lower job satisfaction and worse mental health, with employees who reported lower job satisfaction more likely to have developed emotional burn-out, lower levels of self-esteem, and higher levels of anxiety and depression (Faragher et al., 2005). These health implications extend not only to employees, but also to their employers, who face costs from employees who are more likely to ask for time off and take sick days in order to address poor health. Indeed, a risk-based assessment of 46,000 private and public sector employees found that those who reported having depression were 70% more expensive than those who were not depressed, and employees that were highly stressed and unable to cope with that stress were 46% more costly than employees who were not stressed (Goetzel, Ozminkowski, Sederer, & Mark, 2002).

## 2. Career satisfaction & anxiety

Importantly, anxiety has been shown to play a key role in predicting employees' career satisfaction and success. Moitra et al. (2011) examined the effect of social anxiety on workplace performance, employment rates, and occupational impairment. After screening participants for anxiety symptoms and other comorbid clinical disorders, they found that individuals with social anxiety were more impaired in their workplace functioning as compared to other individuals in the general population, as well as being more than twice as likely to be unemployed (Moitra et al., 2011). Anxiety has also been linked to the process of making significant career decisions. For example, students who are more anxiety prone are significantly more indecisive about their careers compared to those who are not anxiety prone, and high levels of anxiety have been linked to low levels of satisfaction with one's career decision (Fuqua, Seaworth, & Newman, 1987; Kimes & Troth, 1974). More recent studies have corroborated these earlier results, finding that adolescent general trait anxiety is positively associated with career indecision (Campagna & Curtis, 2007; Corkin, Arbona, Coleman, & Ramirez, 2008; Vignoli, 2015).

Recent work has also more clearly implicated anxiety as a prospective risk factor for low career satisfaction. In a meta-analysis using 163 independent samples, Judge, Heller, and Mount (2002) examined the link between personality traits and job satisfaction. They found that only neuroticism, which is defined in part by qualities including anxiety, worry, and self-consciousness, was negatively correlated with job satisfaction. Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, and Barrick (1999) found similar results in that childhood neuroticism was negatively correlated with intrinsic career success, defined as individuals' being satisfied with their careers; this negative link between neuroticism and career satisfaction has also been documented in other studies (e.g., Seibert & Kraimer, 2001), and suggests that individuals who are more prone to anxiety may consequently tend to experience lower career satisfaction.

## 3. Positive coping skills and adult functional competence

Despite strong evidence that anxiety may inhibit career satisfaction, research has yet to consider possible moderators of this link that might be developed alongside or independently from such anxiety and enable individuals to progress effectively in their careers. Indeed, given the aforementioned high prevalence of anxiety among the U.S. population, there are likely skills or personal qualities that enable many people with anxiety to work and achieve career satisfaction. Previous research suggests that the presence of two such factors, positive coping skills and adult functional competence, may play a significant role in reducing anxiety for young adults. For example, positive coping methods have been shown to serve as a protective buffer against anxiety in adolescents, and an increase in adolescents' coping skills has been associated with a reduction in – though not the complete elimination of – anxiety over the course of several years (Kendall, Safford, Flannery-Schroeder, & Webb, 2004; Spence, 2001). Increases in direct problem-solving strategies, positive cognitive restructuring, and distraction strategies have also been shown to precede a decrease in parent-reported adolescent anxiety symptoms over time (Hogendoorn et al., 2014). Moreover, actively exposing anxious individuals to the source of their anxiety can help reduce its negative effects (Parsons & Rizzo, 2008; Powers & Emmelkamp, 2008).

Importantly, meta-analyses examining the effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for anxiety, which typically seeks

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