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The effects of daily stress on positive and negative mental health: Mediation through self-efficacy



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Abstract Daily stressors, compared to traumatic events, are increasingly recognized as important risk factors for mental health. The role of general self-efficacy on the relationship between daily stress and aspects of mental health has not yet been examined. Taking into account the dual factor model of mental health, which postulates that mental health is more than the absence of psychopathological symptoms, we tested mediation effects of self-efficacy separately for positive and negative mental health. Total, direct and indirect effects were estimated using data from a large nationally representative German population sample ($N = 1,031$) by bootstrapped mediation analyses providing 95% bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. Results indicated self-efficacy as a mediator of the effects of daily stressors on mental health, with superior effect sizes for positive compared to negative mental health. Mediation effects were replicated in student samples from Germany ($N = 394$), Russia ($N = 604$) and China ($N = 8,669$). Findings suggest that self-efficacy operates as a buffer of daily stress. However, a full mediation model was not supported as multiple psychological resources can have protective effects. This study provides the first transnational evidence for different stress-buffer effects for the two dimensions of mental health.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Autoeficacia;
salud mental;
estrés cotidiano;
mediación;
estudio descriptivo
de poblaciones

Efectos del estrés cotidiano en la salud mental positiva y negativa: mediación de la autoeficacia

Resumen El estrés cotidiano, en comparación con acontecimientos traumáticos, es reconocido cada vez más como un importante factor de riesgo para la salud mental. El papel de la autoeficacia general en la relación entre estrés diario y aspectos de la salud mental todavía no se ha examinado. Teniendo en cuenta el modelo de dos factores, que postula que la salud mental es más que la ausencia de síntomas psicopatológicos, examinamos la mediación de la

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autoeficacia separadamente para la salud mental positiva y negativa. Efectos totales, directos e indirectos fueron evaluados, utilizando datos de una muestra de la población alemana representativa ($N=1.031$). La autoeficacia es un mediador de los efectos del estrés cotidiano, con efectos superiores para la salud mental positiva. Los resultados fueron replicados en muestras de estudiantes de Alemania ($N=394$), Rusia ($N=604$) y China ($N=8.669$). La autoeficacia actúa como un búfer para el estrés cotidiano. Un modelo de mediación completo no fue apoyado con múltiples recursos psicológicos que pueden tener efectos protectores. Es la primera evidencia transnacional para diferentes efectos del búfer-estrés para las dos dimensiones de salud mental.

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To fully illuminate the processes at work behind the impact of stress on mental health, it is essential to examine the buffering potential of psychological resources and coping mechanisms (Wheaton, 1985). The stress-buffering model postulates that specific psychosocial variables are protective for the pathogenic impact of stress (Cohen & Edwards, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). While stress is recognized as an important risk factor, not all people who experience stress, experience impaired mental health. Although there is evidence that chronic stress of daily life is a better predictor of mental health and well-being (Newnham, Pearson, Stein, & Betancourt, 2014), previous studies predominantly concentrated on traumatic incidents or major life events (e. g. Bosmans, Benight, Knaap, Winkel, & van der Velden, 2013; Guerra, Cumsille, & Martínez, 2014). The cumulative effects of daily stressors are important predictors for the emergence of symptoms of depression and anxiety (D'Angelo & Wierzbicki, 2003; Parrish, Cohen, & Laurenceau, 2011). However, assumptions that merely include direct effects of stress on health are incomplete and ignore possible intervening or mitigating factors, leading to a potentially inaccurate estimation of effect sizes. The strength of the association between stress and mental state depends on characteristics and strategies that differentiate individuals from one another (Leiva-Bianchi, Baher, & Poblete, 2012). The extent to which the effects of daily stress on mental health are mediated through personal characteristics has not yet been examined.

Self-efficacy is a positive resistance resource that is part of the cognitive appraisal process and essential for the regulation of stress (Bandura, 1992; Bisschop, Kriegsman, Beekman, & Deeg, 2004). It refers to an individual's capabilities to perform appropriately in challenging situations. Based on this stress regulatory capacity a wealth of research suggests that self-efficacy is related to aspects of mental health and psychological disorders (e.g. Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2003; Sandín, Sánchez-Arribas, Chorot, & Valiente, 2015). Furthermore, it operates as a mediator for the relationship between stressful life events and depressive symptoms (Maciejewski, Prigerson, & Marzure, 2000). Similarly, there is evidence for its intervening role in context of occupational and student's examination stress (Grau, Salanova, & Peiró, 2001; Karademas & Kalantzi-Azizi, 2004). Although a correlation with daily hassles was found (Holohan, Holohan, & Belk,

1984), there is still a lack of evidence for the mediation effects of general perceived self-efficacy, which refers to a broad range of various functional areas, with stressors of every day life to protect mental health. Moreover, considering the recognition that complete mental health is more than just the absence of psychopathological symptoms (World Health Organization (WHO), 2001), the traditional unidimensional model is no longer sufficient. The protective impact of positive characteristics is relevant for the prevention of health problems as well as for boosting well-being. On this basis, mental health can be divided into two dimensions. Positive mental health is defined as an optimal way of psychological functioning and a general feeling of well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). In contrast, negative mental health includes deleterious facets such as health problems, psychopathology or psychiatric disorders. Despite their intercorrelation, these two factors are distinct and may act relatively independently (Keyes, 2007; Suldo & Shaffer, 2008; Weich et al., 2011). A disregard of the presence of positive characteristics would therefore reduce the predictive value of stress. Perceived self-efficacy expectations are highly positively correlated with positive mental health and negatively with negative mental health. High self-efficacy is related to high levels of subjective well-being, optimism and life satisfaction (Azizli, Atkinson, Baughman, & Giarmmarco, 2015; Bandura, 1992; Luszczynska, Gutiérrez-Doña, & Schwarzer, 2005). Low self-efficacy in turn is related to more symptoms of anxiety, distress and depression (Kashdan & Roberts, 2004; Kwasky & Groh, 2014). The present study seeks to examine the role of general perceived self-efficacy in explaining the effects of daily stress on both positive and negative aspects of mental health. While the cultural background indeed is an important determinant of mental health (e.g., Maercker et al., 2015), it is still unclear whether self-efficacy buffers stress across different cultures. Differences among perceptions of self-efficacy are assumed as eastern cultures are regarded to be more collectivistic and less individualistic and self-focused than western cultures (Bond, 1991). Thus, it is interesting to disclose the effects in China as an eastern nation and Germany as a western nation and in a nation that is undergoing substantial change, like Russia. It has been shown that Chinese report to be lower self-effective than western cultures (Schwarzer, Bassler, Kwiatek, Schroder, & Zhang, 1997). Compared to Germans and Russians, there are also

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