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Improving academic performance and mental health through a stress management intervention: Outcomes and mediators of change

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Abstract

Two hundred and nine pupils were randomly allocated to either a cognitive behaviourally based stress management intervention (SMI) group, or a non-intervention control group. Mood and motivation measures were administered pre and post intervention. Standardized examinations were taken 8–10 weeks later. As hypothesized, results indicated that an increase in the functionality of pupils' cognitions served as the mechanism by which mental health improved in the SMI group. In contrast, the control group demonstrated no such improvements. Also, as predicted, an increase in motivation accounted for the SMI group's significantly better performance on the standardized, academic assessments that comprise the United Kingdom's General Certificate of Secondary Education. Indeed, the magnitude of this enhanced performance was, on average, one-letter grade. Discussion focuses on the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

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Introduction

The majority of children in the United Kingdom (UK) take the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations around the age of 15–16 years. They are comprised of tests, and classroom-based assignments, both of which are nationally standardized. Potential employers use students' overall GCSE grades as an important indicator of basic competence and these scores also largely determine whether or not children go onto higher education. Given the importance placed on GCSE results, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that many children report a high level of mental strain and worry when preparing for, and taking, GCSE exams (e.g., Denscombe, 2000). UK children are, of course, not the only ones to suffer such concerns. Studies in the United States (US) estimate that a large proportion of children report examination stress as well (e.g., Hill, 1984; Hill & Wigfield, 1984). For example, Hill (1984) estimates that between 25% and 30% of US students suffer adverse effects from examination stress and as many as 10 million school students underachieve because of anxiety-related performance impairments. Given such stark figures, it is perhaps not surprising that a branch of psychological research, known as test anxiety (TA), has developed to investigate this phenomenon (e.g., Sarason, 1980, 1984; Spielberger & Vagg, 1995; Zeidner, 1998).

The nature of test anxiety

TA is viewed as a 'situation-specific' form of anxiety that predisposes people to perceive evaluative situations as threatening (Spielberger, 1972). Individuals high in TA are more likely to experience frequent and intense levels of state anxiety, which are in turn accompanied by worry and other test irrelevant thoughts, when being examined (Spielberger, Gonzalez, Taylor, Algaze, & Anton, 1978). Thus, TA consists of two distinct response sets: worry and emotionality. The former describes a cognitive response, where attention is focused on concerns about one's performance, ability or adequacy (Deffenbacher, 1980), and the latter refers to an affective response involving an over-awareness of bodily arousal and tension in the face of evaluative situations (Sarason, 1984).

Research indicates that individuals high in TA frequently experience performance decrements in evaluative situations, and that the cognitive component of TA (worry) contributes most to these deficiencies (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992; Hembree, 1988; Sarason, 1980, 1984, 1988; Wine, 1971). For example, when Deffenbacher (1980) controlled for common variance between worry and emotionality, only worry was negatively associated with academic performance. Furthermore, we have recently shown that the worry component of TA best predicts examination performance amongst undergraduates (Keogh, Bond, French, Richards, & Davis, 2004).

Others argue that the cognitive interpretation, or appraisal, of emotionality determines the extent to which emotional arousal facilitates or debilitates performance (Hollandsworth, Glazeski, Kirkland, Jones, & Van Norman, 1979; Sarason, 1984, 1988). For example, Hollandsworth et al. (1979) found that during a mental ability task, arousal seemed to trigger distracting, task-irrelevant thinking (i.e., worry) in high TA individuals. In contrast, low test-anxious individuals spoke of getting 'psyched up' or of getting 'in stride' (i.e., engaging in task-relevant thinking). The importance of cognitive appraisal in evaluative contexts is further

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