COVID-19 Stressful Life Events and Mental Health: Personality and Coping as Moderators

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Introduction

- The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has significantly affected college students’ mental health (Son et al., 2020), a population generally at risk for mental health difficulties (Duffy et al., 2019).
- COVID-19-related stressful life events (SLE) may have exacerbated existing mental health difficulties among college students.
- Identifying factors that could mitigate or exacerbate the effects of COVID-specific SLE on mental health among college students are critical.

Current Study

Examined the effects of COVID-specific SLE, and the moderating effects of personality (extraversion and neuroticism), coping (problem-focused and avoidance coping), and gender on mental health (depression, anxiety, and life satisfaction) among college students in the light of the current pandemic.

H1: SLE and neuroticism will positively predict depressive and anxiety symptoms, but negatively predict life satisfaction.

H2: Extraversion will negatively predict mental health difficulties, and positively predict life satisfaction.

H3: Extraversion and problem focused coping will buffer the effects of stressful life events on mental health difficulties; neuroticism and avoidance coping will exacerbate them.

Method

Participants: 371 US college students (68% female; M_age = 20.59; SD_age = 2.58); data collected between March 27 to April 27, 2020 via Qualtrics. Participants self-reported on the following measures:

- COVID SLE: measure by Main et al. (2011)
- Personality: Mini Markers (Saucier, 1994)
- Coping: Coping inventory (Aldridge-Gerry et al., 2011)
- Depression: Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9; Spitzer et al., 2006)
- Anxiety: Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-9; Kroenke et al., 2001)
- Life Satisfaction: Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1991)

Results

- High percentages of students reported mild to severe depressive (73.3%) or anxiety symptoms (67%)
- 43%: moderate to severe depressive symptoms
- 34.7%: moderate to severe anxiety symptoms
- SLE and neuroticism predicted depression and anxiety symptoms
- Extraversion positively predicted life satisfaction; neuroticism negatively predicted life satisfaction.
- Problem focused coping predicted life satisfaction; avoidance coping predicted depression and anxiety symptoms.
- Neuroticism exacerbated the relation between SLE and life satisfaction

Discussion

- College students’ mental health negatively impacted by COVID – consistent with prior literature (e.g., SARS pandemic; Main et al., 2011).
- Consistent with prior research:
  - Neuroticism (Eichel et al., 2020) and avoidant coping (Aldao et al., 2010) risk factors for mental health
  - Extraversion (Klein et al., 2011) and problem focus coping (Aldao et al., 2010) are protective factors
- In contrast to previous research (Main et al., 2011):
  - Avoidance coping exacerbated relation between SLE and mental health problems
  - Differences in findings may be attributed to different nature of pandemics (SARS vs. COVID with COVID being more pervasive) and cultural differences (USA versus China).
- In contrast to previous research (Shih, 2006):
  - Males more likely to experience mental health difficulties due to SLE; extraversion protective factor for males

Implications:

- Campus-wide mental health screenings to identify students at risk
- Use stressful life event checklist to identify students at risk
- Provide mental health support
- Provide preventative services (e.g., workshops on emotion regulation and effective coping)