



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.
- ❑ **Personality** and **coping styles** may predict mental health outcomes. However, little is known about how these variables may affect mental health during the current pandemic, and how these factors may interact with COVID related SLE.

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 following measures.

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)

Findings

Figure 1a.

Extraversion and Neuroticism Personality Moderated Effects of Stressful Life Events (SLE) on Life Satisfaction, Depression, and Anxiety

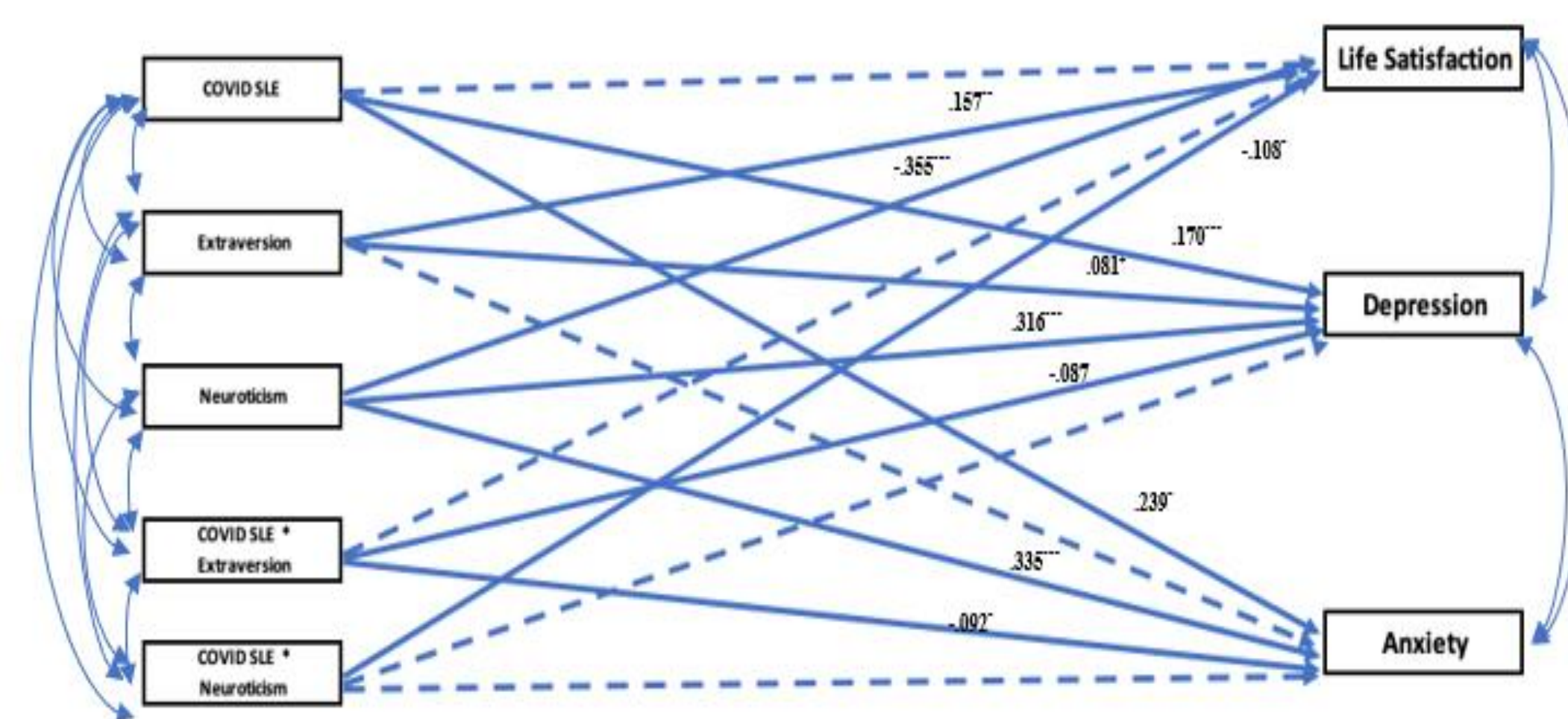
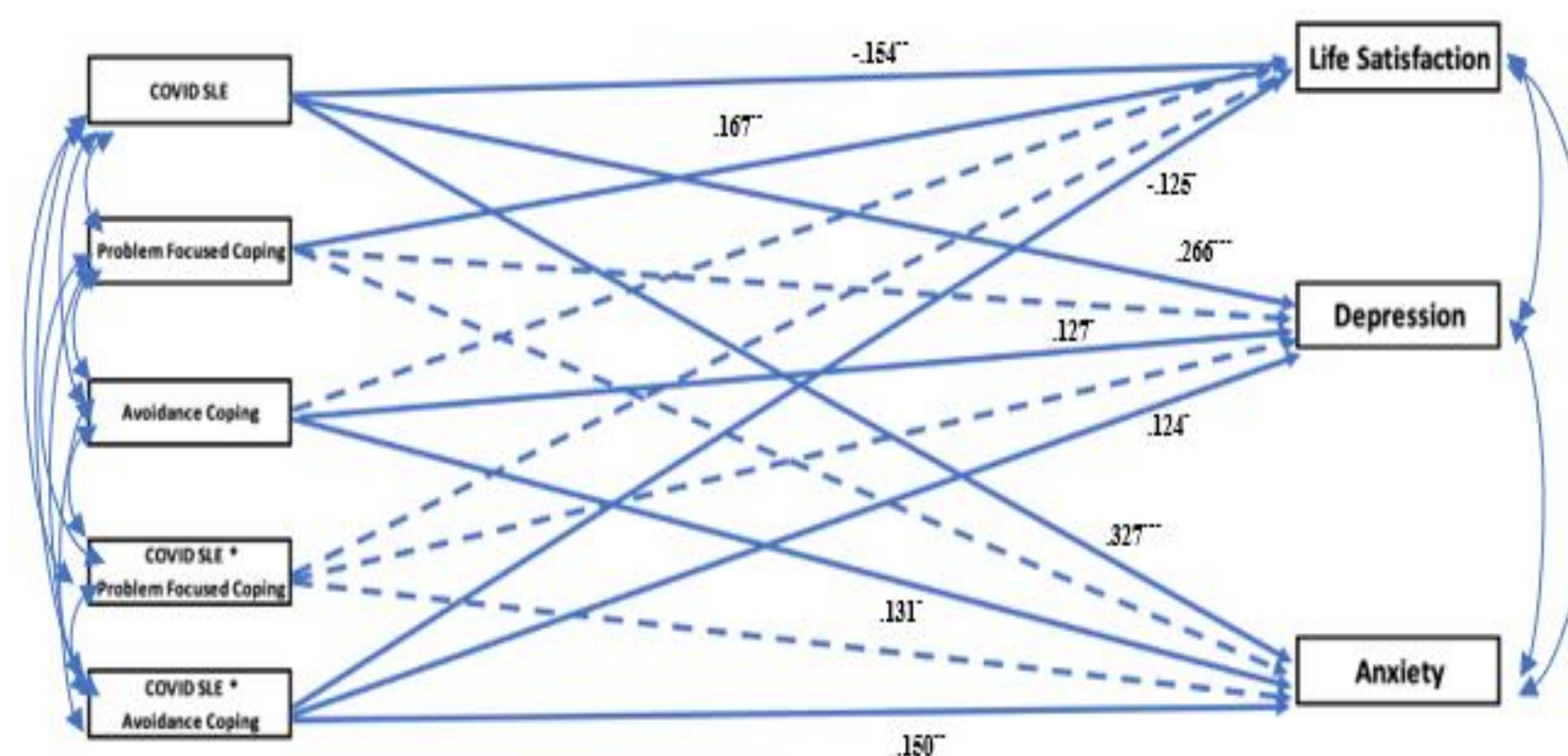


Figure 1b.

Problem Focused Coping and Avoiding Coping Strategies Moderated Effects of Stressful Life Events (SLE) on Life Satisfaction, Depression, and Anxiety



Note. $+ .05 < p < .10$; $* p < .05$; $** p < .01$; $*** p < .001$. Solid lines indicated significant results.

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**
- ❑ **Avoidance coping exacerbated the effects of SLE on mental health difficulties** (depression, anxiety, and low life satisfaction)
- ❑ Gender differences:
 - ❑ For males (not females): SLE predicted life satisfaction, extraversion negatively predicted depression, and extraversion buffered the effect of COVID SLE on depression.
 - ❑ For females (not males), neuroticism predicted more depression

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)