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Anger without Agency: Exploring the Experiences of Stress in Adolescent Girls


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Abstract

Although a great deal of research has measured stressful life events and stress-related symptoms in adolescents, little research has qualitatively examined the experience of stress in teens. The purpose of this study was to utilize thematic analysis to explore how teen girls described their experiences of stress. Thirty-one girls, ages 14–18, were recruited for a study examining stress and stress-related symptoms. As part of this study, they participated in an open-ended, qualitative interview about their personal experiences of stress. Themes included the mind of stress, emotionally shutting out others, and “growing out of it.” The overarching finding was that all teen girls described anger in relation to stress. Most concerning was the predominant theme of a lack of agency in relation to affecting change or management of stress in their lives.

Keywords

Stress, Adolescent Health, Adolescence, Thematic Analysis

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We would like to acknowledge the 31 adolescent girls who despite their busy schedules and their headaches, agreed to participate in this research. It is because of these participants that we are beginning to better understand the experience of stress in adolescence.

Anger without Agency: Exploring the Experiences of Stress in Adolescent Girls

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Although a great deal of research has measured stressful life events and stress-related symptoms in adolescents, little research has qualitatively examined the experience of stress in teens. The purpose of this study was to utilize thematic analysis to explore how teen girls described their experiences of stress. Thirty-one girls, ages 14–18, were recruited for a study examining stress and stress-related symptoms. As part of this study, they participated in an open-ended, qualitative interview about their personal experiences of stress. Themes included the mind of stress, emotionally shutting out others, and “growing out of it.” The overarching finding was that all teen girls described anger in relation to stress. Most concerning was the predominant theme of a lack of agency in relation to affecting change or management of stress in their lives. Keywords: Stress, Adolescent Health, Adolescence, Thematic Analysis

Background

Research investigating the stress-related concepts in adolescents has been characterized as seriously lacking (Bandell-Hoekstra et al., 2002). Although there is a wealth of research exploring stressful life events (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Cooper, Bawden, Camfield, & Camfield, 1987; Waldie, 2000; Young & Dietrich, 2015) and stress and coping (Bandell-Hoekstra et al., 2002; Raheel, 2014; Seiffge-Krenke, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2009), little is really known about how teens experience stress in their own words. Qualitative studies in adolescents have examined stress management (Garmy, Berg, & Clausson, 2015), stress in autism (Browning, Osborne, & Reed, 2009; First, Cheak-Zamora, & Teti, 2016), stress for children in the military system (Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010), stress resulting from chronic illness (Chaudhry & Siddiqui, 2012), and multicultural comparisons in stressors and supports (Borja, Nastasi, Adelson, & Siddiqui, 2016). However, qualitatively exploring the simple experience of stress itself has not been found.

Adolescent girls may even be more vulnerable to the negative effects of stress. Compared to adolescent boys, girls report more stress (Center for Adolescent Health, 2006; Schraml, Perski, Grossi, & Simonsson-Sarnecki Margareta, 2011) and show more negative reactivity to stress (Ordaz & Luna, 2012). Stress during adolescence may contribute to the large portion of females affected by autoimmune disorders in early adulthood (McEwen & Dhabhar, 2002) and chronic symptoms such as headaches (Björling, 2009; Østerås, Sigmundsson, & Haga, 2016; Waldie, 2000). Due to processing stress differently than males, female adolescents are far more vulnerable to the negative impacts of stress, such as depression (Hamilton, Stange, Abramson, & Alloy, 2015) and anxiety (Derdikman-Eiron et al., 2012). In a Swiss national population health survey of 7,428 adolescents (16–20 year olds), 48% of females identified stress and 34% identified depression as their primary unaddressed health issues (Jeannin et al., 2005). However, what is meant by “stress” in the adolescent population and how it is experienced remains unclear.

Understanding stress in adolescents may be complicated by the use of multiple meanings of the term “stress” in health-related research. In the adolescent literature, stress is conceptualized and operationalized broadly, including concepts such as anxiety (Fichtel & Larsson, 2002; Smith, Martin-Herz, Womack, & McMahon, 1999), burnout (Schraml, Perski, Grossi, & Simonsson-Sarnecki, 2011), and feeling hassled (Henker, Whalen, Jamner, & Delfino, 2002). Adolescent stressors have been described as being teased or getting in an argument (Dunton et al., 2016), or as the experience of stressful life events (Hamilton, Stange, Abramson, & Alloy, 2015). The broad range of definitions and operations of the term “stress” weakens the internal and external validity of the concept.

Historically and more generally, stress has been endowed with multiple meanings and uses: anecdotally, clinically, and in stress research. Zautra (2003) and other scholars (Mulhall, 1996; Tennant, Langeluddecke, & Byrne, 1985) pointed out that, despite scholarly focus on the concept of stress, it remains ambiguous and poorly defined. A major difficulty in defining stress results from multiple contextual meanings within and across individuals. In rare studies, adolescents are invited to identify their own, unique stressors (Chao et al., 2015), however most often, adolescent stress is measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) a quantitative, retrospective instrument asking about stress in the past two weeks. Although stress in adolescents has been researched for decades, the concept of stress remains individualized and ambiguous, thus requiring a more qualitative, individual approach.

Therefore, in an effort to truly understand the individual and unique meaning of stress for a group of adolescent girls, the present study captured personal narratives and accounts of individual experiences of stress and stress related feelings. Participants were invited to self-define their experiences of stress through personal accounts and narratives in a semi-structured interview as a fundamental basis to develop a more comprehensive understanding of adolescent stress. Our findings represent commonalities and differences among each participant’s individual construction of her experience of stress.

The idea for this study emerged when speaking with adolescent girls about their stress, Björling was surprised to find that they consistently described a range of unique experiences they felt were related to stress. As Björling searched the literature regarding stress in adolescence, she found that although stress in adolescence is an increasing health problem (APA, 2013), few studies qualitatively explored adolescents’ experiences of stress. Both Björling and Singh theorized that providing adolescents an opportunity to share their own experiences of stress would yield a richer, more authentic view of their lived experiences. In addition, they presumed that further illuminating these experiences could have both research and clinical implications.

Methods

Design

This study was an exploration to better understand the research question: What is the experience of stress in adolescent females? Therefore, in-person, one-on-one guided interviews were conducted to gather personal narratives of stress. Conceptual/thematic analysis was used to analyze and articulate findings. This study was a qualitative component of a larger, mixed-methods study exploring the relationship between stress and headaches in teen girls (Björling & Singh, 2017).

Sample

A convenience sample of teen girls (ages 14–18) who reported suffering from headaches was recruited from an urban, Pacific Northwest high school. This school was chosen for its large and diverse study population. The study was advertised as a study exploring stress and headaches. Thirty-one teen girls enrolled and completed the full study. The research sample included 31 girls aged 14 to 18 years old with a median age was 16 ($n=11$). Grade levels ranged from 9th to 12th with the largest number of participants ($n=12$) in the 11th grade. Participants were asked to self-describe their ethnicity. Of the 31 participants, most ($n=18$) described themselves as white and the remaining participants identified as: African-American ($n=2$), Hispanic and Hispanic-White ($n=6$), Asian ($n=1$), Hawaiian-Japanese ($n=2$), and Bangladeshi ($n=2$).

Procedures

After receiving approval from the Institutional Internal Review Board, flyers describing the study were posted in the high school teen health center and in the cafeteria. Interested participants contacted the investigator and were screened for recent headache activity and then enrolled in the larger study. The full mixed-methods study consisted of three phases: (a) orientation and stress interview, (b) electronic diary phase, and (c) closure and exit interview. This paper is an analysis of phase (a), the qualitative stress interviews. Interested participants obtained parental consent and were then interviewed in their home with a parent at home, but not in the same room.

Study interviewers included the primary investigator and 3 university health-science graduate students. The interview was piloted with 6 adolescents prior to the start of the study and showed participants required more prompts (sub-questions) in order to be more responsive and provide more data. From these pilot interviews, an interviewer training manual was created by the primary investigator and approved by a researcher with expertise in adolescent interview techniques. Interviewers were trained by practicing mock interviews, observing real interviews, and eventually conducting their own interviews while being observed by the primary investigator. During the study, the interview process was discussed at weekly meetings among study staff, the primary investigator, and an adolescent interview expert. After interviewer training was completed, two steps were taken to ensure consistency in interview protocol: (a) the primary investigator reviewed all recorded interviews and provided each interviewer with individual feedback and (b) study staff attended weekly interviewer meetings. All interviewers, including the primary investigator, also captured field memos after each interview to add situational and observational detail to the interview recordings.

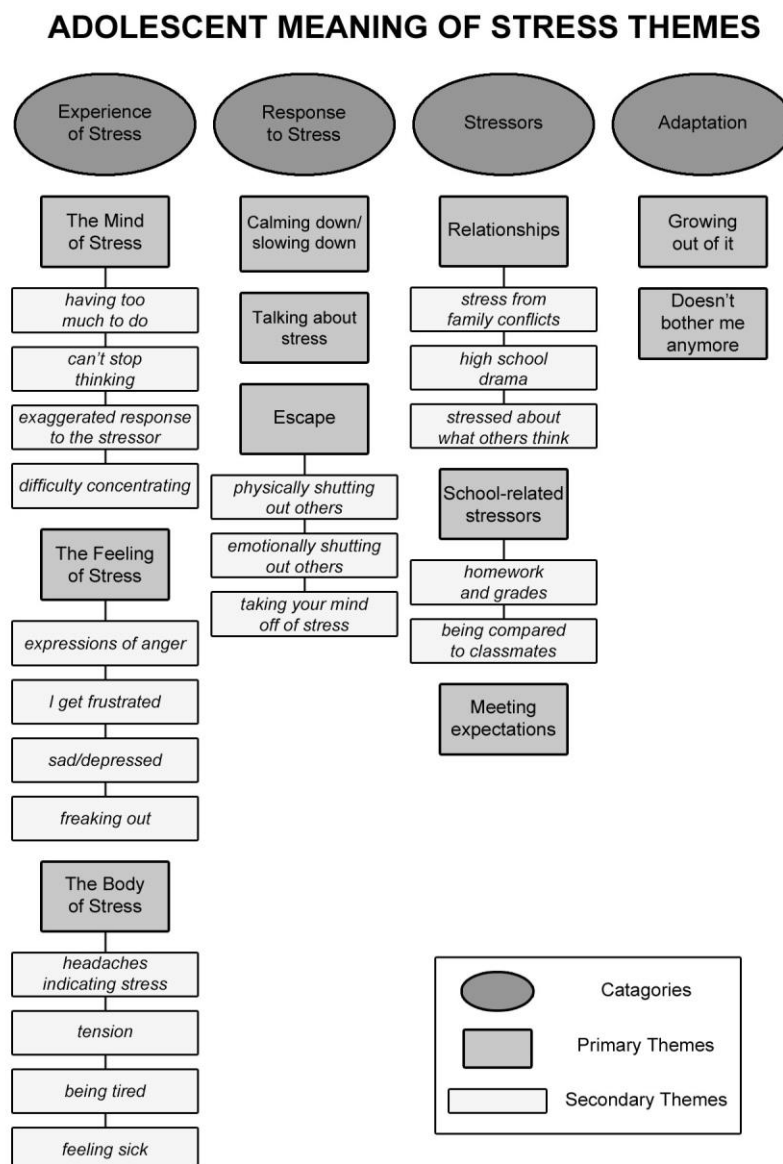
Interviews were recorded on Olympus DS-2 digital voice recorders. Interviewers stated the date, time, and the participant's study ID number on the recording. Interviews ranged from 12 to 45 minutes and typically took place in a common area such as the kitchen or dining room. Interview recordings were then uploaded into digital audio files that were later transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Adolescent meaning of perceived stress interview. The Adolescent Meaning of Perceived Stress (AMPS) interview guide was created specifically for this study (see Appendix A). An operating theory was that stress is a commonly used term among teens, but not often discussed in detail or contemplated in depth. Therefore, a qualitative, open-ended approach would elicit new meaning and understanding regarding the experience of stress. To reduce the likelihood that teens would provide culturally expected and learned responses, the AMPS was designed to encourage individualized responses and experiences of stress without the interviewer offering examples or leading the respondent. The AMPS used scripted prompts to

guide interviewers and participants to discuss various aspects of stress including mental, physical, emotional, and environmental domains of stress. The AMPS included 10 brief questions including, “How do you know when you are stressed?” and “What situations are typically stressful for you?” Participants were also asked to “describe a situation that they used to find stressful but no longer do.”

In an effort to elicit each participant’s individual experience, interviewers avoided suggesting typically stress-related symptoms, emotions, or situations. For example, most of the teens mentioned anger as a common emotion they associated with stress. The study staff was specifically trained not to ask a participant if she experienced a specific emotion, such as anger, as this would have greatly biased our data. This effort strengthened the validity of our data and the individuality of these interviews.

Figure 1: Adolescent Meaning of Stress Theme Structure



Analysis

The method used in this analysis was conceptual/thematic description (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). This process entailed identifying common themes relating to the individual

experiences of stress as well as interpreting and integrating the data into larger, conceptually relevant themes. Identifiers (e.g., names) were removed and interview transcripts were imported into ATLAS-ti for further organization and conceptual and thematic coding. All transcribed text was separated into individual quotes and labeled with associated themes. Whenever possible, in-vivo codes were used to maintain the original feel and tone of the raw data. To aid in reliability, interview data and their assigned codes were reviewed and by a second qualitative researcher outside the project. The outside researcher was given the raw data, grouped together based upon codes, but the codes themselves were omitted. The outside reviewer was asked to determine a code that made sense of the associated quotes. The outside reviewer's codes and the original research codes were very similar and were discussed and integrated into the codes for the final analysis. The final codes were then reviewed to determine larger, relevant themes to describe and begin to understand the overarching experience of stress for the entire sample. The main themes were combined into an illustrative visual (Figure 1) for discussion and dissemination.

Results

Supporting the theory that stress is a complex concept that is multifaceted within and across individuals, numerous primary and supporting themes were identified in this study. In an effort to organize and accurately convey this material, four categories were identified to describe all of the study findings: the experience of stress, the response to stress, the stressors, and the adaptation. Each category is supported by primary themes that help define the categories. Figure 1 visually illustrates the categories and associated primary and supporting themes. What follows is a detailed discussion with specific examples of how teen girls experienced stress.

The first category explored was the experience of stress. This category encompasses how each teen personally experienced stress and includes descriptions of the mental, physical, and emotional impact of stress. The second category, the response to stress, includes the ways in which the teens responded to and coped with the experience of stress. The third category, the stressors, includes the teens' discussions about what situations and environments were stressful for them. The fourth category, adaptation, encompasses specific examples of ways in which the teens have overcome or minimized stress.

The Experience of Stress

The experience of stress is characterized by three primary themes: the mind of stress, the feeling of stress, and the body of stress.

The mind of stress. The mind of stress primary theme encompassed four distinct supporting themes, which were identified by the participants that related to cognitive and psychological reactions the teens noticed during times of stress. The mind of stress included the supporting themes of *having too much to do*, *can't stop thinking*, *exaggerated response to the stressor*, and *difficulty concentrating*.

Most of the teen girls described feelings of being overwhelmed or having too much to do as their experiences of stress. They described struggles to complete homework on time and to balance extracurricular activities and required schoolwork. The teens also described a lack of time for more pleasurable activities as a result of *having too much to do*:

Making too many plans, having—you know, having too much homework, too many plans...like I used to play basketball, and it was really intense, and you'd

have to go from practice to work to this. Like having too much to do, having too much on my plate. Too many things. (18-year-old)

The next supporting theme was *can't stop thinking*. Many of the teens described an inability and/or a desire to control their thoughts: "Overwhelmed...yeah, overwhelmed about something and it's always in your mind and it never...for you it never feels like it actually goes away. So I guess basically something you're always thinking about...I guess" (18-year-old).

Several teens recognized that their unintentional *exaggerated response to the stressor* was in fact making stress worse. In some cases, this perception came from someone close to the teen (such as a parent or teacher) and for others, this was a personal realization. One such example is a teen who spoke about how she and a friend reacted to stress at school:

Schoolwork especially, like if we're in the same class together, we'll be like, "Oh, my gosh, I can't believe this project is due on Wednesday. We'll never have time to finish." Or if we both don't understand something, we'll be stressed about how like together almost like in unison, like about how it's going to affect our grade and how we're going to fail and—I mean, we kind of tend to blow things out of proportion. I guess that also kind of makes things more stressful. (15-year-old)

The teens talked about the various ways they noticed their stress and many times they described it as a difficulty in concentration. Therefore, examples of the supporting theme *difficulty concentrating* included "I end up forgetting stuff a lot when I'm stressed out" and "it's hard to focus on like just one thing or another. It's hard to concentrate or something." The following is a more explicit example of this supporting theme, which shows the overlap between stress, concentration, and anger: "When I can't concentrate or when I'm over-heated, or when I'm angry, that's when I think I feel stressed, and I can't really concentrate on my environment or surroundings" (15-year-old). In this particular example, the teen described not only a mental component of stress, but also an emotional component—anger. Anger was a very common theme for these teens and will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

The feeling of stress. The primary theme, the feeling of stress, included the four supporting themes, *expressions of anger*, *I get frustrated*, *sad/depressed*, and *freaking out*. When asked about the emotional experience of stress, study participants described only negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and sadness. As one teen described, many of these negatives were experienced simultaneously or within a short time frame. Additionally, the building up of negative emotions was also stressful.

Within the feeling of stress, anger was the most commonly reported. The supporting theme *expressions of anger* was a common and somewhat unexpected thematic finding as almost all of the girls in the study endorsed the feeling of anger in relation to stress. Anger was described for some as happening commonly during stress:

I get angry at...like...when people ask me if I can do more stuff, to add into the schedule, and then I get angry at...like having to do that, and then I don't want to do it, and you know I have to, so...that's when I get angry. (16-year-old)

Anger was not just described as a passive, internal feeling, but also as an outward aggressive feeling. One teen described her anger toward others when stressed. Another teen described anger toward herself when stressed:

I get mad. I get really mad, or upset with myself because I can't do something, or if I can't process thoughts properly or something like that...I get more angry at myself. And I just start blowing my top pretty much. (16-year-old)

For several individuals, anger overlapped or preceded feelings of sadness, and for others the overlap between sadness and anger was almost indistinguishable. Feelings of frustration were also commonly described. Descriptive feelings of frustration and discouragement were included in the supporting theme *I get frustrated*: "I get frustrated, like I start breaking down, just like starting to not care" (16-year-old).

Most of the teens described frustration in relation to schoolwork and tests. Several teens suggested that the lack of overwhelming homework inevitably led to unavoidable frustration.

Freaking out was another supporting theme under the feelings of stress and included teens' descriptions of anxiety, nervousness, worry, and panic. One 15-year-old described *freaking out* as being an indicator that she was stressed: "Well, like when you, get like, really like confused, or like freaking out about something. Or like anxious and stuff" (15-year-old).

Overall the teens were very articulate in their descriptions of the emotions they experienced during stress. Although there were numerous emotions described such as anxiety, depression, sadness, frustration, anger, no real outliers were mentioned. Three teens described their emotional experience of stress as an emotional progression that moved from one emotion to another. For example, one teen described anger as her initial emotion reaction to stress, but over time, her anger turned to sadness and an eventual feeling of hopelessness. None of the participants discussed a positive emotional experience of stress such as feeling motivated, inspired, or even positive nervous energy such as performance anxiety.

The body of stress. The third primary theme under the experience of stress category was the body of stress. This primary theme included the supporting themes: *headaches indicating stress*, *tension*, *feeling sick*, and *being tired*. Participants discussed how they experienced their stress physically and the ways in which their bodies responded to stress. Because these girls were enrolled in our larger study exploring stress and headaches, many of them talked about experiencing headaches when they were stressed. Interestingly, their descriptions depicted how their headaches related to their experience of stress. For example, headaches for some of the teens were described as an indicator of stress:

I guess that the headaches probably kind of build as the stress builds. And I don't even realize that I have one until—I don't know, like that boiling point where I'm just like, ow! ...Just feels like my brain hurts. There's all this pressure building up. (17-year-old)

Headaches were also described as a result of school-related events such as homework.

In addition to headaches, the girls described physical experiences of stress as "tension," "making me sick," and "being tired." The supporting theme of *tension* mainly included muscular tension when the teens described their experience of stress: "I just get really jittery and I kind of -- tense, I'm really tense" (15-year-old).

The supporting theme of *feeling sick* included mainly narratives about stomachaches, nausea, and a general feeling of becoming "sick" in response to stress: "Like, your stomach will start hurting. Or you'll feel like you're sick" (15-year-old).

The final supporting theme in the body of stress was *being tired*. This theme included descriptions of difficulty sleeping and feeling tired. One teen suggested that being tired led to further stress: "Oh, and not getting enough sleep. That has to do a lot with stress because if you don't get enough sleep, like how are you going to like function" (16-year-old).

Three teens in our study were unable to identify any physical symptoms of stress. One of these teens stated she had never thought about how stress affected her body. A few of the teens were able to articulate emotional and cognitive effects of stress, but could not describe any physical sensations associated with stress. The rest of our sample was easily able to identify physical responses to stress. All of the descriptions of physical responses depicted something undesirable and some were examples of physical responses that created further distress due to an inability to function (e.g., headaches and fatigue). More uncommon symptoms associated with stress were “dizziness,” “bumps on the back of my neck,” “acne acting up,” “chest hurts,” and “back pain.” It is evident that stress affects these teens in mentally, emotionally, and physically undesirable ways.

The Response to Stress

In addition to discussing the ways in which the teens experienced stress, they also talked about how they responded to stressful experiences. Three primary themes were identified as the teen’s response to stress: calming down/slowing down, talking about stress, and escape.

Calming down/slowing down. Some of the teens described their efforts to counteract their stress by calming themselves down. These girls described responses such as eating, exercising, and deep breathing as methods to calm down. For example, one teen used breathing as a way to cope with stress: “I like breathe. I seriously tell myself to breathe because like I know like I’m getting really like anxious and stuff like that” (17-year-old). Another teen discussed her use of art as an outlet in response to stress: “I’m a big artist, so drawing, painting – sometimes if I’m in the mood for it, it just gets my feelings out so it clears my mind out more” (16-year-old). This primary theme of calming down/slowing down was described by only a couple of girls in the study. Talking about stress and escape were far more common responses to stress.

Talking about stress. Most of the teens used talking to others about stress as a method of coping. Teens described talking to parents, peers, and school counselors. For example, this teen described how talking about stress helped her to calm down: “Well, I think sometimes I talk to my mom about it. Yeah, just talking about being stressed helps...she’ll just talk me through it and calm me down” (15-year-old). Another girl used talking about stress as a way to not feel alone: “Because then it’s not like I’m the only one that’s going through this, and I’m not like...I don’t know. It just doesn’t seem as stressful when you talk to somebody else” (15-year-old).

Although many of the girls discussed the benefits of talking to one another about stress, one 14-year-old mentioned that she and her friends “just don’t talk about” the things that stressed them. In addition, a 15-year-old said that talking to her friends about stressors increased feelings of anger and was not helpful. Talking about stress to someone else was a common coping theme for these girls, however, the most prominent theme of coping was to escape.

Escape. When the teens discussed their use of escape in response to stress, all of their responses fell into one of three supporting themes. The first supporting theme, *taking your mind off of stress* included many examples in which the teens described escaping stress by listening to music, reading a book, taking a nap, exercising, or writing poetry. Many teens listed two or three common activities that they used as ways to escape from stress: “Um...go for a walk, draw pictures, take a bath kind of thing, or...uh...read. Take my mind off it for a while” (17-year-old). It was surprising to us how many teens used reading as a form of escape, as several teens described this as their most effective strategy of coping with stress.

A second and more concerning type of escape fell under the supporting theme of *physically shutting out others* and included responses such as isolation, running away, or hiding

from others. The following example was a teen's description of physically shutting people out as a coping method:

Usually it's when I'm having like a bad day, I'll get completely stressed out and just like not want to do anything. Just become totally anti-social. I didn't want to talk to anyone...I was just like, just leave me alone. The world sucks. God hates me, basically. Just wanted to be able to go to sleep and just wake up and be happy again. (16-year-old)

The third supporting theme for escape was *emotionally shutting out others*. One teen described her former coping skills as physically shutting out her mother, and now she has learned to do this emotionally:

Now when I argue with my mom I've learned to have more like, tactics—so I don't like get so far gone that I'm just running out of the house every time...I kind of like block myself off from her or something, you know. Like emotionally. (16-year-old)

The teens' responses or methods of coping with stress were to calm down, talk to others, or escape through distraction or avoidance. Calming down/slowing down was the least common supporting theme. Participants who depicted calming down/slowing down responses also demonstrated desires to recognize and transform unwanted, emotional reactions to stress. However, teens who described escape and avoidance forms of coping did not convey desires to address their stressors or alter their reactions to stress. Coping through escape was the most prominent theme for the group.

The Stressors

The teens talked about many examples of environments or situations that caused stress for them. Most of the reported causes related to school and relationships. In analyzing all of the discussions about stressors for these teens, three primary themes emerged: relationships, school, and meeting expectations.

Relationships. Three supporting themes were identified in the discussions of relationship stressors: *stress from family conflicts*, *high school drama*, and *stressed about what others think*.

The supporting theme of *stress from family conflicts* included the stressfulness of witnessing or being part of a conflict between friends or family members. For example, one teen described the stress of arguments within her family:

...you know, like, other [family] members are arguing or something and so there's—or if, you know, there's always a chance like, “Oh crud, are you going to get dragged into it?” or you know, it's like, you know I don't want to listen to other people doing that. It's kind of bad vibes kind of thing. (17-year-old)

A couple of girls described a feeling of pride when asked to help solve a conflict between friends and feeling good that their friends confided in them. However, one girl expressed that playing a mediator role added a level of burden on her emotionally.

The second supporting theme identified under relationships stressors was the theme of *high school drama*. Most of the girls said that being talked about by peers in the past or present was stressful, and the girls gave examples of gossiping and backstabbing: “And you know,

people talk—at least girls are really bad, like they talk about each other. And it’s pretty bad” (16-year-old).

Given the girls’ descriptions of how girls can talk negatively about one another, it is not surprising that the third supporting theme in the category of relationships is *stressed about what others think*. This supporting theme included several descriptions revealing the girls’ experiences of being stressed by what their parents, teachers, or peers think of them. For example, when asked what was stressful for her, one teen described her desire to please other people:

Like failing and not doing as good as I could’ve...I like to please other people...I like to please, grades, everything, and I, *pause*, I don’t know, I think that’s really hard for me, with that stuff...And it ends up that I get so stressed that I just kind of explode afterwards, you know. (14-year-old)

The primary theme of relationship stressors also included descriptions of emotional situations related to boyfriends, alcohol and drug use by peers, and various forms of peer pressure. Less common themes of relationship stressors were racism, conflicts with schoolteachers and coaches, and work-related stressors with peers.

School-related stressors. Another primary theme under the stressors category was school-related stressors. Two supporting themes were included in this category; *homework and grades*, and *being compared to classmates*. Almost all of the participants described a desire to do well academically, so it was not surprising, given the importance placed upon academics that school-related stressors were common. Within the *homework and grades* supporting theme, the teens described their struggles to manage excessive amounts of homework and maintain academic standings in higher-level courses. Several girls suggested that the stressfulness of homework was often exacerbated by their own procrastination. In addition, many girls discussed feelings of anxiety or nervousness about high school exams and college entrance tests.

Several teens also suggested that competition at school was very stressful. For some teens, competition among themselves or a fear of losing created stress. One teen discussed her fears about losing a school debate.

A different type of competition described by some of the teens was competition among peers. One teen described the stressful experience of *being compared to classmates*: “[My parents are] always blaming me and always just comparing me. Look at your age. Look at what you have done. Look what other people are doing. Look around you” (18-year-old). Several teens described competition as an obstacle in their friendships. Even close friends were competitive and critical when discussing academic performance. A few girls also suggested that peers were ranked within their circle of friends, based upon academic performance.

Every teen at some point during the interview described a school-related stressor. Stressfulness of homework, grades, and tests was by far the most common school-related stressor. The supporting theme of *being compared to classmates* was prevalent as well and in some cases overlapped with the other supporting theme *grades and homework*. Interestingly, there was no discussion of social support or relief in relation to school-related stressors. In fact, two participants speculated that this type of stress would inevitably increase through college and continue into their professional work-life.

Meeting expectations. The third primary theme under the stressors category was meeting expectations. Many of the girls in the study described stress related to an expectation either of their own, of their parents, a teacher, or another authoritative figure. In this category, there were no identified supporting themes as each girl’s description of meeting expectations

had its own unique characteristics. Teens described their struggles to meet expectations relating to grades and even family roles, as described by this teen:

When my uh, parents were just like getting divorced, my father had some expectations that I didn't feel like I could fulfill pretty much. And my mom, well not really, my mom, I just felt like I couldn't really make my parents happy you know. (14-year-old)

Several of the girls who discussed the stress of meeting expectations also described the expectations as being far beyond their reach, such as the amount of work they could do in a given time or the number of tasks they could manage at one time. Typically, their description of meeting expectations was one of an inability to perform as expected and therefore a sense of hopelessness.

Most of the girls in our study felt that the bulk of their stressors centered around the three primary themes: relationships, school, and meeting expectations. Stressors for the teens in this study included being caught in relationship conflicts with peers and family members, meeting the academic demands of homework and tests, and meeting the social expectations of peers, parents, and teachers. The stressful experiences described permeated the social, familial, and academic aspects of the girls' lives. Although stressors such as school and relationship conflicts were the most typical, the atypical stressors of money and the media were equally important.

Adaptation

A final category, adaptation, was utilized in order to capture the teens' discussions of former stressors that were no longer stressful. The teens discussed a myriad of previously stressful situations most of which fell into two primary themes; growing out of it and doesn't bother me anymore.

Growing out of it. The teens described many examples of stressors they had overcome. Most of these examples consisted of "learning to fit in." These were examples of past social stresses, typically in middle school or early high school, and were examples of not fitting in with their peers. However, when asked why this was no longer a stressor, many teens just described that the situation had changed, or they, themselves, had changed and they didn't know why – the stress just "went away": "...now it's not nearly as stressful just 'cause... I don't know, I guess I matured, or other people matured, I don't know, but it's—I don't find that sort of thing happening anymore, so..." (17-year-old). Other teens attributed their fitting in as due to making more friends. Several teens described fitting in now, but for unknown reasons. A few teens described the dissipation or disappearance of certain stressors as a result of "maturing," "growing out of it," or just "getting used to it."

Doesn't bother me anymore. In addition to descriptions of fitting in and feeling more comfortable, most of the teens gave examples of stressors that simply got better, became easier, or no longer bothered them. A 16-year-old spoke about not caring as much/not being as bothered anymore when giving class presentations. Stressors in this primary theme included life-changing stressors such as losing a close friend. A 16-year-old, described how a friend's death was no longer a stressor: "Um...when my friend died a while ago, like a couple months ago, that was something that was just like...so, so stressful...and like...it doesn't really, you know, affect me that much anymore" (16-year-old). This teen felt that during the time of her friend's death, all of her peers were focused on this, making it difficult for her to not think about. However, recently, her friends and teachers stopped talking about the friend's death, enabling her to forget about it on occasion, and therefore making it less stressful for her.

Adaptation to stress for most girls was about finding their social network, spontaneous changes that resulted in the stressor no longer being stressful, and feeling more comfortable with a former stressor. A couple of teens could not identify an example of a stressor that they had overcome. These teens typically described feeling stressed about the same issues for as long as they could remember. None of the girls interviewed described overcoming stress as a result of learning a stress management skill or being taught to overcome a stressor. Interestingly, only one example of an academic stressor that was no longer stressful was the example of class presentations. In each of these examples, of the primary theme doesn't bother me anymore, the teens attributed this reduced stressfulness to their feeling more comfortable around their peers.

Interpretation and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore personal stress narratives in order to better understand the experiences of stress for female teens. The teens in this study reported experiencing stress on mental, emotional, and physical levels including uncontrollable thoughts, anger, and headaches. They also reported responding to stress by calming down, talking about it, and escaping through distraction and avoidant behaviors. Stressors that affected this group were widespread and included being caught in relationship conflicts, school-related stressors, and meeting expectations of themselves and others. Finally, recovering from stress was mostly identified in areas of social acceptance, spontaneous change, and feeling more comfortable with themselves. Interesting findings included the large proportion of girls who described anger in relation to stress, the prevalence of escape and avoidance as a coping mechanism, and the lack of personal agency in relation to affecting stress now or in the future.

Anger

None of our study participants described positive forms of stress, such as stress as a motivator or stress as positive energy before a performance. Negative emotions described were emotions typically assumed to associate with stress such as anxiety, worry, and nervousness. However, most teens also described feelings of anger, which, at times, overlapped with sadness or depression.

Anger in relation to stress was the most prominent and unexpected finding in this study. Almost all of our teens mentioned feeling angry in relation to stress at some point during the interview. Anger was described as an indicator of stress and as a response to stressors. In addition, their experience with anger was not limited to feelings of anger, but for some, included aggressive behaviors and the feelings of a desire to harm someone else. Anger has been associated with increased stress in adolescents (Henker et al., 2002), however aggressive behavior in relation to stress is often limited to the discussion of male adolescents (Eisler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988). Relational aggression, unlike overt regressive behavior, is a way of inflicting social harm and occurs commonly in teen girls (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Relational aggression results in a silent victimization for many girls and thereby increases psychological distress (Prinstein et al., 2001). The common anger described by the teens in the current study may well result from or lead to relational aggression resulting in a cycle of aggression and distress among peers. Investigation into such a cycle should be considered for further research.

The negative emotions described by the girls were associated with their experience of stress. More specifically, anger may be related to how the girls processed stress and the

availability of coping skills and resources. Many of the teens in this study felt that they had little control or power over the stressors in their lives or their reactions to those stressors.

Lacking Agency

In a review of the teens' comments about their experiences of stress and their responses to stressors, a much larger, overarching theme of lacking agency emerged. Although not many girls articulated this specifically during their interviews, it was a pervasive meta theme that seemed to encompass many of their quotes about their experiences. The teens often positioned themselves as unable to affect change in relation to stress and described stress as an external and unavoidable force. In addition, they described their internal physical and emotional reactions to stress as out of their control. Although this theme of helplessness was not articulated often, one 18-year-old gave a clear example of being the recipient of negative stress and not having control over it:

It's like when you're just really uneasy and you're worried and you don't know what's gonna happen. So it's like—you just feel like there's nothing you can do at the moment. So it's like—it's just overwhelming. Like you just feel overwhelmed with stuff that you can't control. So it's like no matter what you do you can't affect what's gonna happen. So it's just like something that's just constantly bothering you. (18-year-old)

Without any sense of agency in relation to stress, it is understandable that these girls did not articulate having learned strategies or techniques to help them manage stress. In response to a question of "What is no longer stressful?" none of the teens portrayed themselves as participating in the reduction of the stressfulness or the stressor. Most teens told these stories without the implication of personal agency and conveyed events as happening *to* them, rather than how *they* had changed. Further supporting a lack of agency, in talking about their adapting to stress, many teens were unable to explain why certain stressors were no longer stressful.

Most of the teens portrayed themselves as helpless in relation to stress at some point in their interview. If stress feels unavoidable and unchangeable to these girls, perhaps this accounts for "escape" being a commonly described response to stress for many teens. Avoidant coping is a common response to stress reported by as many as 65% of 9th grade teens (Chandra & Batada, 2004). The use of avoidant coping strategies has been associated with behavioral and psychological problems (Seiffge-Krenke, 2000).

Further supporting the meta theme of lacking agency, the teens' descriptions of stress implied perceiving themselves as victims of the stress in their lives. All of the teens mentioned disliking the negative effects of stress, but none described a desire to initiate change or strategies to manage stress. Feeling powerless in relation to stress during the formative, adolescent years may contribute to learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is seen as primarily a cognitive process to uncontrollable events in which an individual learns to expect outcomes to be uncontrollable (Abramson, Garber, & Seligman, 1980). As the teen above stated, "you can't affect what's gonna happen."

Limitations

Discussion and interpretation of these results need to be considered within the context of study limitations, including the location and context of the interview, sample selection bias, the effect of interviewer ethnicity on participant responses, and some teens' difficulty in discussing stress.

First, it is important to note that the study was advertised, and these teens were recruited, at their high school. Therefore, the context of school and stresses related to school are inherent in the study. Second, the study was advertised as a study examining stress and headaches, therefore it is important to remember these are the stress experiences of girls who typically have headaches that may not be representative of a typical adolescent population. Fourth, several teens described some difficulty in thinking and talking about stress. For instance, some of the teens mentioned that they had not previously thought much about the ways in which stress affected them physically or emotionally. This may have been due to an unfamiliarity with discussing stress.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the experience of stress for teen girls. Stress in adolescent health literature is often measured and discussed using related concepts such as anxiety, irritability, and a lack of control. Though these concepts do appear to be related, the narratives of stress in female girls illustrate stress as far more complex, involving emotional, physical, and social domains of their lives. Although limited due to the small sample size, this study provides preliminary evidence for an association between stress and negative emotions such as anger in adolescent girls. In addition, data from this preliminary study suggests a concerning lack of agency in relation to addressing or managing stress. The combined effect of negative emotions associated with stress and a lack of agency in managing stress potentially increases the girls' vulnerability to the negative impacts of stress and stress-related illness. Given the fragility of adolescent neurodevelopment and the likelihood of stressful experiences to contribute to psychopathology, it is imperative to further understand how anger is related to stress in adolescent girls. Therefore, these concepts warrant further investigation in an effort to promote the healthy development of adolescent girls.

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APPENDIX

ADOLESCENT MEANING OF PERCEIVED STRESS INTERVIEW

Study ID No. _____

Stress is reported commonly among teens; however, the term stress has different meanings to individuals, which I am trying to understand. Also, as you know, in this study you will be asked to rate your level of stress every day. So, I need to know more about how you personally define and experience stress.

- 1) Tell me briefly what stress means for you?
- 2) How do you know when you are stressed?

- 3) Describe for me the ways that you experience stress in your body?
- 4) Describe the ways that you typically experience stress emotionally?
- 5a) Describe a recent experience that you found stressful? Tell me about the situation, where you were, what was happening.
- 5b) Tell me about your thoughts and feelings, and what you actually did in response to feeling stressed.
- 6) Why do you think this experience was stressful for you?
- 7) Tell me, what kinds of situations are typically stressful for you?
- 8) What types of situations do you think most people find stressful?
- 9a) Describe for me a situation or experience that used to be stressful, but you no longer find stressful.
- 9b) In what way do you feel differently now about _____ (insert name of situation described above) than you did then?
- 10) When you feel really stressed, how do you make yourself feel better?

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