SOURCES OF STRESS AND EFFECTIVE COPING STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY FIRST YEAR EXERCISE STUDENTS

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BACKGROUND & AIMS

Australian undergraduate students experience higher levels of stress than the general population, in part caused by the adjustment students need to make during their first year of university (Smart, McCabe, Bird, Byrne & Cornish, 2024). Learning to effectively cope with stressors is important for student wellbeing and success, and can improve engagement (Smart et al, 2024; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

The current observational study aimed to identify sources of stress in first year exercise students, and to determine the relationship between stress regulation strategies, engagement and performance.

METHODS

Consenting first year students undertaking a biomedical science course in an exercise program (n=89) were asked what they found stressful about university, and which strategies they use to regulate these stressors. Responses were subjected to inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Spearman's correlation was used to examine relationships between frequencies of reported strategies with academic engagement, measured by online learning management system activity, and academic performance in the course.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Students described twelve main types of stressors, with the top sources of stress being workload (40%), balancing work and life (38%), assessment pressures (25%), and self-regulation (16%). At the beginning of semester students planned to use more problem-focused strategies to regulate their stress, such as time management, goal setting and study techniques. At the end of semester, students reported using more emotion-focused strategies, such as exercise, meditation practices and work-life balance. The use of multiple coping strategies at the end of semester significantly correlated with a higher course grade and more engagement with online lecture content. These findings suggest that employing multiple emotion regulation strategies enhances the student experience and facilitates learning. Educators could draw on these findings by promoting the use of multiple coping strategies to improve student experiences and academic performance.

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