A study of stress, social support, and perceived happiness among college students

Üniversite öğrencileri arasında stres, sosyal destek ve algılanan mutluluk üzerine bir çalışma

Keith A. King[1], Rebecca A. Vidourek[1], Ashley L. Merianos[2], Meha Singh[1]

Abstract

This study aimed to explore the relationship of students' happiness, stress, and emotional closeness to others to help move towards evidence-based practices for this population. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to examine whether college students' perceived happiness differed significantly based on stress, frequency of stress management techniques, and emotional closeness to others (social support). Results indicated that students are least happy about their financial situation, at work, and at school. Perceived happiness differed significantly based on stress levels and emotional closeness to others. Those who reported low perceived happiness reported higher stress levels and lower emotional closeness to others. The majority (61.0%) of participants reported having high stress, and were most stressed regarding school, lack of time, and with their future career. Although high levels of stress were reported, most (72.0%) students reported low frequency in using stress management techniques. Similar to the findings on perceived happiness, perceived stress differed significantly based on emotionally closeness to parents/legal guardians and friends. Those who reported low perceived stress reported higher emotional closeness to others.

Key Words: Happiness, well-being, stress, social support, college students

Özet

Bu çalışma öğrencilerin mutluluk, stres ve diğer insanlarla olan duygusal yakınlıkları arasındaki ilişkinin, bu örnekleme yönelik delile dayalı uygulamaların ortaya koyulabilmesi için keşfedilmesini amaçlamaktadır. Bu nedenle, çalışmanın birincil amacı üniversite öğrencilerinin algıladıkları mutluluğun stres, stres yönetimi yöntemlerini kullanma sıklığı ve diğer insanlarla olan duygusal yakınlıklarına (sosyal destek) göre değişip değişmediğini incelemektir. Sonuçlara göre, öğrencileri en çok mutsuz eden şey işteki ve okuldaki maddi durumlarıdır. Algılanan mutluluk stres seviyelerine ve diğer insanlarla olan duygusal yakınlığa bağlı olarak anlamlı bir şekilde değişmektedir. Düşük seviyede mutluluk algısı olduğu belirlenenlerin stres seviyeleri daha yüksek ve diğer insanlarla olan duygusal yakınlığı daha düşüktür. Katılımcıların çoğu (%61,0) çok stresli olduklarını ve en çok stresi okulla, zamanın azlığıyla ve gelecekteki kariyerleriyle ilgili olarak yaşadıklarını belirtmişlerdir. Yüksek seviyede stresin olduğu belirtilmiş olsa da, çoğu öğrenci (%72,0) stres yönetimi yöntemlerini az kullandıklarını belirtmiştir. Algılanan mutlulukla ilgili bulgularla benzer şekilde, algılanan stres de duygusal anlamda ebeveynlere/yasal koruyuculara ve arkadaşlara olan yakınlığa göre anlamlı şekilde değişmektedir. Düşük seviyede stres algıladıklarını belirtenler diğer insanlarla yüksek seviyede duygusal yakınlığa sahip olduklarını belirtmişlerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mutluluk, iyi oluş, stress, sosyal destek, üniversite öğrencileri

[1] University of Cincinnati Health Promotion and Education Program, USA

[2] University of Cincinnati Health Promotion and Education Program, USA. E-mail: merianal@mail.uc.edu

Introduction

Happiness has been considered a major life goal in common philosophy (Anic & Toncic, 2013). Happiness is defined as a multidimensional component of unconscious, cognitive, and motivational processes that are unique to how life is interpreted and received by individuals (Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & DiMatteo, 2005). Previous research indicates that increased subjective well-being and happiness offers multiple benefits to individuals (Schiffrin & Nelson, 2010). According to a study conducted on happiness among the college population, students believe that the core structure of happiness consists of high self-esteem, high self-confidence, social factors, occupational factors, and family factors (Crossley & Langdridge, 2005). Nevertheless, college students face numerous barriers that impact their overall perceived happiness. Previous research has revealed that students who have high stress levels are less likely to report high perceived happiness (Schiffrin & Nelson, 2010).

Despite numerous prevention efforts, the overall prevalence rates of stress have significantly increased over time (Wallace, 2007). Various types of high stress, including daily stressors (Almeida, 2005) and major life events (Brown & Harris, 1989; Chappel, Suldo, & Ogg, 2014), have significant impact that may lead to negative psychological and physical health-related consequences among individuals. Daily stressors such as interpersonal tensions and network conflicts, have a more immediate effect on well-being by causing both psychological distress and physical symptoms of stress (Almeida, Wethington, & Kessler, 2002). Major stressors have been associated with mental and physical health issues including depression, migraine headaches, ulcers, heart attacks, and in some cases death (Wallace, 2007). As aforementioned, there may be an interrelationship between stress and happiness as high stress levels have been linked to decreased perceived happiness (Natvig, Albrektsen, & Qvarnstrom, 2003).

In recent years, there has been an alarming increase in stress levels among the college student population (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). Observing stress levels from longitudinal survey findings indicated that the number of students feeling overwhelmed has dramatically increased over the years (Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Plante & Flinders, 2008). Thus, stress poses a significant public health problem for many students due to the college environment producing various academic, social, and personal challenges they may encounter (O'Donovan & Hughes, 2008). When college students have extremely high stress or they view stress negatively, they tend to frequently experience more physical and psychological impairments than those who have lower stress levels. Additionally, when students are unsuccessful in developing emotional closeness to others or lack social connections, they can experience physical and mental health related problems (Bruhn, 2005). Due to the fact that excessive stress and mental health problems have steadily increased overtime among the college student population, further studies are clearly warranted to move towards evidence-based practices for this high-risk population (Oman et al., 2008).

Increasing frequency of acute stress management techniques has been proven to help decrease stress including the following techniques: imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, and meditation (Smith, 2007). In addition to acute stress management techniques, a modifier of stress that has been proven to increases happiness is social connections (Bruhn, 2005). Emotional closeness to others has been strongly linked to subjective well-being and ultimately protects individuals from the deleterious effects related to high stress levels (Ammar, Nauffal, & Sbeity, 2013; Rayle & Chung, 2007). Family, friend, romantic, and coworker relationships are independently and robustly related to happiness (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). Seeking emotionally supportive relationships moderate the stress-depression relationship equally in men and women among college-aged students (Felsten, 1998). High perceived happiness has been associated with students being highly social, having stronger

romantic and social relationships, more extroverted, and are more agreeable compared to their counterparts with low perceived happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002).

The Present Study

Based on previous research, an inverse relationship between happiness and stress among college students exists (Schiffrin & Nelson, 2010;). However, low perceived happiness and high stress levels continue to be common complaints from college students (Wallace, 2007). Thus, more studies are required to examine the nature of this relationship more closely and will aid in identifying why student rates of unhappiness and high stress levels remain very high. Examining acute stress management techniques will also add to the literature and help move towards evidence-based practice to reduce potential long-term mental and physical health-related problems among this high risk population. Additionally, examining social relationships and if these relationships effect happiness or stress levels will be helpful for future intervention efforts for this high-risk population. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine whether college students' perceived happiness differs significantly based on stress level, frequency of using acute stress management techniques, and perceived emotional closeness to important others (social support). Additional analyses will be conducted to examine whether college students' stress levels differs significantly based on perceived emotional closeness to important others (social support).

Method

Participants

After receiving approval from the university's institutional review board, a convenience sample of college students ($N = 485$) attending classes at a public, Midwestern university completed a reliable and valid survey assessing their overall happiness and stress levels. The survey was completely voluntary in nature and no incentives were offered to complete the survey. If college students did not wish to participate, then they were excluded from the survey. All survey responses were kept anonymous and confidential. Of the 485 college students who completed surveys (95% response rate), 60.9% were male and 39.1% were female (see Table 1). The mean age of participants was 21 years ($SD = 3.986$). Of participants, 2.9% were freshman, 22.1% were sophomores, 37.9% were juniors, 30.8% were seniors, and 6.2% were graduate students. Regarding race/ethnicity, the majority of participants were white (84.5%), 7.5% were black, 3.8% were Asian, 1.7% were multi-racial, 1.0% were Hispanic, 0.2% were Pacific Islander, 0.2% were Native American, and 1.0% were Other. Most student participants were enrolled full-time (90.8%), and only 9.2% were part-time. Regarding involvement with student organizations, more than two-thirds (66.0%) of students reported not being involved with a student organization and 34.0% reported being involved.

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics*

Item	n	%
Sex		
Male	294	60.9
Female	189	39.1
Grade Level		

Freshman	14	2.9
Sophomore	106	22.1
Junior	182	37.9
Senior	148	30.8
Graduate Student	30	6.2
Race		
White	404	84.5
African American	36	7.5
Asian	18	3.8
Multi-Racial	8	1.7
Other	5	1.0
Hispanic	5	1.0
Native American	1	0.2
Pacific Islander	1	0.2
Enrollment		
Full-time	436	90.8
Part-time	44	9.2
Student Organization Involvement		
No	318	66.0
Yes	164	34.0

Note: N = 485; Percent refers to valid percent; Missing values excluded

Instruments

A review of literature identified valid and reliable scales that the present study's instrument was derived from, including the Authentic Happiness Scale (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), and the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). The researchers found components from each scale worthwhile and incorporated those into the final comprehensive instrument. Thus, a valid and reliable valid survey instrument was developed for this study which included the use of the following six survey sections: perceived happiness, perceived stress levels, frequency in using stress management techniques, perceived emotional closeness to important others, and demographic information.

The Perceived Happiness subscale (16 items) assessed students' happiness and requested them to indicate how happy or unhappy they felt by using a five-point scale (1 = extremely unhappy; 2 = unhappy; 3 = neither happy nor unhappy; 4 = happy; 5 = extremely happy). A sixth response option was provided (not applicable) for each statement. Students responded to the following 16 items: "Overall, how happy or unhappy do you feel: (1) with your life in general, (2), with where you are in life, (3) with yourself, (4) with your physical appearance, (5) with your personality, (6) with your ability to communicate with others, (7) with your health, (8) with your accomplishments in life thus far, (9) with your financial situation, (10) with your parent(s)/legal guardian(s), (11), with your friends, (12) with your significant other, (13) with your co-workers, (14) at home, (15) at school, and (16) at work."

The Perceived Stress Level subscale (12 items) requested participants to indicate how stressed they felt about different items using a five-point scale (1 = not stressed at all; 2 = slightly stressed; 3 = moderately stressed; 4 = very stressed; 5 = extremely stressed). A sixth response option was provided (not applicable) for each statement. Students responded to the following 12 items: "Overall, how stressed do you feel: (1) with your life in general, (2) regarding school, (3) regarding home, (4) regarding work, (5) with your parent(s)/legal guardian(s), (6) with your friends, (7) with your significant other, (8) with your co-workers, (9) with your financial situation, (10) with your lack of time (feeling rushed), (11) with your future, (12) with your career."

The Frequency in Using Stress Management Techniques subscale (11 items) requested participants to indicate how frequently they used specific stress management techniques by using a five-point scale. (1 = never (0% of the time); 2 = rarely (1-49% of the time); 3 = sometimes (50% of the time); 4 = most of the time (51-99%); 5 = always (100% of the time)). Students responded to the following 11 items: "When you feel stressed, how helpful are each of the following in reducing your stress? (1) take deep breaths, (2) count to ten, (3) pray, (4) meditate, (5) listen to music, (6) contract and relax muscles, (7) stretch, (8) run or exercise, (9) try to look at the big picture, (10) talk to or call someone to vent, (11) imagine/ visualize something pleasant."

The Perceived Emotional Closeness to Important Others subscale (4 items) requested participants to indicate how emotionally close they felt toward their parents, friends, significant others, and co-workers by using a four-point scale (1 = not close at all; 2 = minimally close; 3 = moderately close; 4 = extremely close). A fifth response option was provided (not applicable). Students responded to the following 4 items: "Overall, how emotionally close do you feel towards (1) your parent(s)/legal guardian(s), (2) your friends; (3) your significant other, and (4) your co-workers." The demographics section asked questions related to sex, age, grade level, race, school enrollment (full-time or part-time), and membership of a student group. Face and content validity was established by asking a panel of experts ($N = 9$) to review the instrument to determine if it appeared to adequately measure the topics at hand. Based on offered comments from these experts, revisions were made. To establish stability reliability for the instrument, a test-retest design was used, and the survey was distributed to a convenience sample of college students (N= 30) at the university. One week later, the survey was distributed to the same students. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed for nonparametric items and yielded coefficients >.84. To establish internal consistency reliability, Cronbach alphas were computed for each subscales, resulting in alphas >.80.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, the university's institutional review board approved the study. General education courses were randomly selected by the researcher, and the research contacted the instructor explaining the purpose of the study and requesting permission to distribute the survey during regular class time. Upon receiving instructor permission, the researcher went to the courses and explained the purpose of the study to the students, informed them of the confidential and anonymous nature of the survey, and that all participation was completely voluntary. In order to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of students, they were informed to not put their name, social security number, or identification number on the survey instrument. Students were instructed to place their completed surveys face down in an envelope that was placed on the instructor's desk.

Data Analysis

All collected data were entered and analyzed using the SPSS statistical software package. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, means, standard deviations, and ranges of scores were used to describe the demographic and background characteristics, perceived happiness, stress levels, frequency in stress management techniques, and perceived emotional closeness to significant others. Demographic variables were tested using Chi-Square analyses and analyses of variance (ANOVAs). If significance was found, then covariates were used in subsequent analyses. Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) assessed whether students' perceived happiness differed based on stress levels, frequency in using stress management techniques, and perceived emotional closeness to important others. Additionally, MANOVA was used to determine whether students' stress levels differed based on emotional closeness to others. When MANOVAs were found to be significant, univariate F-tests were subsequently performed to identify the specific items in the subscale that were significant. An alpha level of .05 was used for all data analyses.

Results

Perceived Happiness Levels

Students reported feeling the happiest with "parent(s)/legal guardian(s)" ($M = 4.22$; $SD = .857$), "friends" ($M = 4.16$; $SD = .752$), and with their individual "personality" ($M = 4.14$; $SD = .722$) (see Table 2). The items students reportedly felt most unhappy about was their "financial situation" ($M = 2.98$; $SD = 1.156$), "at work" ($M = 3.56$; $SD = .885$), and "at school" ($M = 3.57$; $SD = .882$). A Perceived Happiness score was calculated by summing the 16 individual happiness items on the survey. The actual range was 16-80 with a mean for happiness of 57.21 ($M = 57.21$, $SD = 8.709$).

Table 2. *Perceived overall happiness*

Overall, how happy or unhappy do you feel…	M	SD
With your parent(s)/legal guardian(s)	4.22	.857
With your friends	4.16	.752
With your personality	4.14	.722
With your significant other	4.09	1.009
At home	4.02	.735
With your life in general	4.00	.628
With yourself	3.85	.738
With your ability to communicate with others	3.84	.876
With your accomplishments in life thus far	3.80	.882
With where you are in life	3.77	.799
With your health	3.74	.948

With your co-workers	3.73	.795
With your physical appearance	3.58	.875
At school	3.57	.882
At work	3.56	.885
With your financial situation	2.98	1.156

Note: $N = 485$; Missing values excluded

Means based on a 5-point scale (1 = Never (0%); 2 = Rarely (1-49%); 3 = Sometimes (50%); 4 = Most of the Time (51-99%); 5 = Always (100%))

Perceived Stress Levels

Participants reported feeling the most stress "regarding school" ($M = 3.40$; $SD = 1.051$), "with lack of time (feeling rushed)" ($M = 3.12$; $SD = 1.227$), and with their "career" ($M = 3.06$; $SD = 1.317$). Students indicated that they felt the least stress with "friends" ($M = 1.54$; $SD = .765$), with "parent(s)/legal guardian(s)" ($M = 1.71$; $SD = .948$), and with "co-workers" ($M = 1.72$; $SD = .889$). A Perceived Stress Level score was calculated by summing the stress items ($N= 12$). The actual range of scores was 12 to 56 with a mean of 27.38 ($SD = 7.617$).   This score was subsequently dichotomized into two levels based on the median split (High Stress = 25-56, and Low Stress = 12-24). This resulted in nearly two-thirds (61.0%) of students having a high stress level compared to 39.0% reported having a low stress level.

Frequency in Using Stress Management Techniques

In the moment of experiencing acute stress, students identified the top three effective stress techniques as frequently listening to "music" ($M = 3.36$; $SD = 1.027$), "look at the big picture" ($M = 3.12$; $SD = 1.118$), and talked to or called "someone to vent" ($M = 2.93$; $SD = 1.259$. The least frequently used stress management techniques were "counting to ten" ($M = 1.30$; $SD = .626$), "meditation" ($M = 1.64$; $SD = .919$), and "contract and relax muscles" ($M = 2.05$; $SD = 1.113$). The actual range of scores was 11 to 55 with a mean of 26.03 ($SD = 6.369$). Results indicated that most (72.0%) of the students reported overall low frequency in using stress management techniques and 28.0% reported high frequency in using stress management techniques.

Perceived Emotional Closeness to Important Others

Students felt most emotionally close to parent(s)/legal guardian(s) ($M = 3.40$; $SD = .752$) and to friends ($M = 3.25$; $SD = .701$). The actual range of scores was 2 to 8 with a mean of 6.65 ($SD = 1.204$). Results indicated that nearly two-thirds (62.1%) of students reported high perceived emotional closeness to these important others and 37.9% reported low perceived emotional closeness to important others.

Perceived Happiness Based on Stress Levels

MANOVA results revealed there was a significance difference in students' perceived happiness based on stress levels, $F(16, 202) = 2.590$, $p = .001$ (see Table 3). Univariate F-tests revealed that the following happiness items differed significantly based on stress: "With your life in general," "With where you are in life," "With yourself," "With your accomplishments in life thus far," "With your financial situation," "With your parent(s)/legal guardian(s)," "At home," and "At work."

Table 3. *College students' perceived happiness based on stress level*

Overall, how happy or unhappy do you feel…	High Stress M (SD)	Low Stress M (SD)	F	P
With your life in general	4.04 (.613)	4.22 (.685)	3.918	.049
With where you are in life	3.71 (.827)	4.05 (.691)	9.488	.002
With yourself	3.81 (.738)	4.05 (.746)	5.224	.023
With your accomplishments in life thus far	3.73 (.879)	4.07 (.754)	7.878	.005
With your financial situation	2.77 (1.151)	3.55 (.870)	27.510	< .001
With your parent(s)/legal guardian(s)	4.02 (.920)	4.45 (.737)	12.025	.001
At home	3.97 (.788)	4.18 (.706)	3.990	.047
At work	3.45 (.892)	3.72 (.918)	4.498	.035

Note: $N = 485$; Missing values excluded

Means based on a 5-point scale (1 = Extremely Unhappy; 2 = Unhappy; 3 = Neither Happy nor Unhappy; 4 = Happy; 5 = Extremely Happy)

Perceived Happiness based on Frequency in Using Stress Management Techniques and Emotional Closeness to Others

MANOVA results revealed perceived happiness differed significantly based on perceived emotional closeness to important others $F(16, 200) = 5.337$, $p < .001$ (see Table 4). Univariate F-tests revealed that the following happiness items differed significantly based on perceived emotional closeness to important others: "With your life in general," "With where you are in life," "With yourself," "With your physical appearance," "With your personality," "With your ability to communicate with others," "With your health," "With your accomplishments in life thus far," "With your financial situation," "With your parent(s)/legal guardian(s)," "With your friends," "With your significant other," and "At home". MANOVA results controlling for sex revealed there was not a significant difference in students' perceived happiness based on the frequency in using stress management techniques.

Table 4. *College students' perceived happiness based on emotional closeness to others*

Overall, how happy or unhappy do you feel…	High Emotional Closeness M (SD)	Low Emotional Closeness M (SD)	F	P
With your life in general	4.24 (.556)	3.90 (.716)	14.212	< .001

With where you are in life	4.02 (.690)	3.56 (.859)	17.133	< .001
With yourself	4.06 (.677)	3.66 (.790)	17.133	< .001
With your physical appearance	3.81 (.878)	3.43 (.871)	11.975	.001
With your personality	4.31 (.583)	3.95 (.806)	13.844	< .001
With your ability to communicate with others	4.02 (.794)	3.63 (.929)	12.504	< .001
With your health	3.81 (.895)	3.49 (.975)	9.529	.002
With your accomplishments in life thus far	4.00 (.784)	3.61 (.907)	9.255	.003
With your financial situation	3.17 (1.124)	2.86(1.112)	5.278	.023
With your parent(s)/legal guardian(s)	4.45 (.736)	3.76 (.927)	34.665	< .001
With your friends	4.45 (.571)	3.74 (.814)	58.546	< .001
With your significant other	4.25 (.897)	3.83(1.133)	7.577	.006
At home	4.28 (.671)	3.69 (.767)	30.978	< .001

Note: $N = 485$; Missing values excluded

Means based on a 5-point scale (1 = Extremely Unhappy; 2 = Unhappy; 3 = Neither Happy nor Unhappy; 4 = Happy; 5 = Extremely Happy)

Perceived Stress based on Emotional Closeness to Others

MANOVA results controlling for sex revealed there was a significant difference in students' perceived stress levels based on perceived emotional closeness to important others, $F(12,208) = 2.085$, $p = .019$ (Table 5). Univariate F-tests revealed that the following three stress items differed significantly based on perceived emotional closeness to important others: "With your friends," "With your future," and "With your career".

Table 5. *College students' perceived stress based on perceived emotional closeness to others*

Item	High Emotional Closeness	Low Emotional Closeness	F	P
Overall, how stressed do you feel…	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*		
With your friends	1.45 (.781)	1.67 (.798)	4.011	.046
With your future	2.72 (1.140)	3.02 (1.164)	5.196	.024
With your career	2.65 (1.057)	3.01 (1.140)	8.465	.004

Note: $N = 485$; Missing values excluded

Means based on a 4-point scale (1 = Not Close at All; 2 = Minimally Close; 3 = Moderately Close; 4 = Extremely Close)

Discussion

The results from this study can be used to assist professionals in more thoroughly understanding college students' perceptions on their happiness, stress, frequency of stress management techniques, and emotional closeness to others. In turn, the findings will aid specialists in developing effective programs and campus efforts for this population. The present study found that college students are

least happy with their financial situation, school and work. Such findings are alarming since previous literature has well-documented the finding that college students' happiness can be affected by academics, finances, and time-related issues in previous years (Oman et al., 2008). College campuses should further explore why students are not happy with school, and create proper initiatives to increase their students' overall happiness. Additionally, evidence-based interventions for this population are clearly needed to alleviate student unhappiness with school and finances.

Findings from the present study indicated that perceived happiness differed significantly based on stress levels and emotional closeness to others. Those who felt unhappy were most likely to report high stress and low emotional closeness to others compared to their happy counterparts. This finding further supports existing literature on decreasing college students' stress levels and strengthening their emotional closeness to others will help to increase their overall perceived happiness (Schiffrin & Nelson, 2010). However, the majority (61.0%) of college students reported having a high stress level, suggesting that evidence-based practices are needed to reduce stress levels among this population.

Previous research conducted among the college population found that students tend to cope with stress by engaging in leisure activities, seeking social connections, (Chao, 2011), and employing effective time management skills (Misra & McKean, 2000). Emotional closeness to others has been reported as a robust correlate of subjective well-being (Bramston, Pretty, & Chipuer, 2002; Bruhn, 2005; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Kahn & Garrison, 2009; Merianos, King, & Vidourek, 2012). Therefore it is not surprising that the present study found that one of the college students' top three frequent stress management techniques was talking to someone to vent, in addition to reporting listening to music and trying to look at the big picture as frequently used stress management techniques. Programs which emphasize the importance of developing quality friendships and family relationships could possibly improve students' happiness and decrease stress among the college student population.

Interestingly, students did not directly report financial issues as a major stressor in their lives in the present study. Instead, college students reported their future career as a top stressor which may be associated with staying in school and graduating on time. Conversely, college students did indicate they were most unhappy with their finances, work, and school load pressures. Consequently, these issues regarding future career may lead to students reducing coursework load or dropping out of school for paid work (Joo, Durband, & Grable, 2009). College students have to find balance between academic, financial and time management stress-related pressures, and these pressures may be reduced by increasing emotional closeness to others (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). Additional studies are needed to more fully examine the academic and time-related impact on financial stress among college students. Stress management programming on college campuses could incorporate novel ways students can expand their social connections by joining student organizations, sports, or living in student housing. For example, students who are distance learners can use the Internet to connect with other students through online programming such as Skype or use similar technology to talk with their family and friends if they attend school away from their family.

Although the most frequently reported stress management techniques are ones that are not typically fostered in stress-based interventions, the present study also found that most (72%) college students reported overall low frequency in using stress management techniques. These findings support previous research that college students not adopt proven effective stress management techniques including counting to ten, meditating, and contracting and relaxing muscles (Misra & McKean, 2000), students have overall low frequency in using stress techniques as a whole. Future educational and awareness campaigns of increasing multiple stress management techniques are needed to decrease stress levels among this high-risk population.

Comparable to the findings on perceived happiness, stress levels differed significantly based on emotionally closeness to parents/legal guardians and friends. Specifically, participants who felt high emotional closeness to others were more likely to report low stress levels than their counterparts who felt low emotional closeness. As abovementioned, emotional closeness to important others can buffer the negative effects of stress, including reduced happiness (Deminr, 2005; Wong & Cheuk, 2005). The present study found that more than half of participants (62.1%) reported high emotional closeness to important others. This highlights the importance of incorporating quality social relationships to increase perceived happiness of college students. Supporting literature indicates that college students believe happiness consists of personal relationship factors, social factors, occupational factors, family factors, an emphasis on high self-confidence, and an emphasis on low stress (Argyle, 2001; Crossley & Langdridge, 2005; Diener & Seligman, 2002). Within the college environment, students who form social relationships with their peers tend to report higher positive attitudes and higher commitment to school work whereas not forming social relationships compromises students' attitudes of their time management skills, college finances and ultimately finishing their degrees (Cook, 2011). Future interventions should influence students to develop and maintain social relationships with their friends and family to increase their happiness.

Limitations and Recommendations

The limitations of this study should be noted. First, data obtained in this study were self-reported in nature which may have led to some students offering socially desirable responses. Second, the sample was delimited to college students at the large, Midwestern university and may not be generalized to other geographical areas. Third, measuring happiness is subjective in nature and may or may not correlate with the actual perceived happiness of the students. Finally, this was a cross-sectional study and therefore causal relationships could not be determined.

Professionals may assist in improving college students' mental health by increasing their happiness, decreasing high stress levels, and by increasing frequency of stress management techniques and social connections simultaneously. Educational programming for increasing happiness should include novel social connections strategies along with skills for maintaining healthy relationships such as assertiveness training. Furthermore, professionals should incorporate financial planning along with skills for being successful at work or school because these areas were where students were the unhappy in the present study. Future research should explore the relationship between perceived happiness and demographic data in order to create effective interventions that increase happiness levels among college students. Evaluation research needs to be conducted to identify effective programs that improve students' happiness and decrease high stress levels as this study proves that these rates are very high. Future interventions should aim to reduce stress levels by teaching college students how to adopt effective stress management behaviors.

References

Almeida, D. M. (2005). Resilience and vulnerability to daily stressors assessed via diary methods. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *14*(2), 64-68.

Almeida, D. M., Wethington, E., & Kessler, R. C. (2002). The daily inventory of stressful events an interview-based approach for measuring daily stressors. *Assessment*, *9*(1), 41-55.

Ammar, D., Nauffal, D., & Sbeity, R. (2013). The role of perceived social support in predicting subjective well-being in Lebanese college students. *The Journal of Happiness and Well-Being, 1*(2), 121-134.

Anic, P., & Toncic, M. (2013). Orientation to happiness, subjective well-being and life goals. *Psychological Topics, 22*(1), 135-153.

Argyle, M. (2001). *The psychology of happiness*. London: Methuen.

Bramston, P., Pretty, G., & Chipuer, H. (2002). Unraveling subjective quality of life: An investigation of individual and community determinants. *Social Indicators Research*, *59*(3), 261-274.

Brown, G. W., & Harris, T. O. (1989). *Life events and illness*. New York: Guildford.

Bruhn, J. G. (2005). *The sociology of community connections*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.

Chao, R. (2011). Managing stress and maintaining well-being: Social support, problem-focused coping, and avoidant coping. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 89*(3), 338-348.

Chappel, A. M., Suldo, S. M., & Ogg, J. A. (2014). Associations between adolescents' family stressors and life satisfaction. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 23*(1), 76-84.

Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 24,* 385-396.

Crocker, J., & Luhtanen. R. K. (2003). Level of self-esteem and contingencies of self-worth: Unique effects on academic, social, and financial problems in college students. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 29*, 701-711.

Crossley, A., & Langdridge, D. (2005). Perceived sources of happiness: A network analysis. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *6*(2), 107-135.

Diener, E., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). Very happy people. *Psychological Science*, *13*(1), 81- 84.

Ehrhardt, J. J., Saris, W. E., & Veenhoven, R. (2000). Stability of life satisfaction over time analysis of change in ranks in a national population. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 1*, 177-205.

Felsten, G. (1998). Gender and coping: Use of distinct strategies and associations with stress and depression. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping, 11*, 289-309.

Helliwell, J. F., & Putnam, R. D. (2004). The social context of well-being. *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society London B*, *359*, 1435-1446.

Joo, S., Durband, D., & Grable, J. (2009). The academic impact of financial stress on college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice, 10*(3), 287-305.

Kahn, J. H., & Garrison, A. M. (2009). Emotional self-disclosure and emotional avoidance: Relations with symptoms of depression and anxiety. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *56*(4), 573-584.

Lyubomirsky, S., & Lepper, H. S. (1999). A measure of subjective happiness: Preliminary reliability and construct validation. *Social Indicators Research, 46*, 137-155.

Lyubomirsky, S., Tkach, C., & DiMatteo, M. R. (2005). What are the differences between happiness and self-esteem? *Social Indicators Research*, *78*(3), 363-404.

Merianos, A. L, King, K. A., & Vidourek, R. A. (2012). Does perceived social support play a role in body image satisfaction among college students? *Journal of Behavioral Health, 1*(3), 178-184.

Misra, R., & McKean, M. (2000). College students' academic stress and its relation to their anxiety, time management, and leisure satisfaction. *American Journal of Health Studies*, *16*(1), 41-51.

Natvig, G. K., Albrektsen, G., & Qvarnstrom, U. (2003). Associations between psychosocial factors and happiness among school adolescents. *International Journal of Nursing Practice*, *9*, 166-175.

O'Donovan, A., & Hughes, B. M. (2008). Social support and loneliness in college students: Effects on pulse pressure reactivity to acute stress. *Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health, 19*, 523-528.

Oman, D., Shapiro, S. L., Thoresen, C. E., Plante, T. G., & Flinders, T. (2008). Meditation lowers stress and supports forgiveness among college students: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of American College Health*, *56*(5), 569-578.

Pierceall, E. A., & Keim, M. C. (2007). Stress and coping strategies among community college students. *Community College and Journal of Research and Practice, 31*(9), 703-712.

Rayle, A. D., & Chung, K. (2007). Revising first-year college students' mattering: Social support, academic stress, and the mattering experience. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, and Practice, 9,* 21-37.

Schiffrin, H. H., & Nelson, S. K. (2010). Stressed and happy? Investigating the relationship between happiness and perceived stress. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *11*(1), 33-39.

Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validations of interventions. *The American Psychologist, 60,* 410-421.

Wallace, E. V. (2007). Managing stress: What consumers want to know from health educators. *American Journal of Health Studies, 22*(1), 56-58.

Wong, K. S., & Cheuk, W. H. (2005). Job-related stress and social support in kindergarten principals: The case of Macau. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *19*(3), 183-196.

Zautra, A. J. (2003). *Emotions, stress, and health*. New York: Oxford University Press.