Examining Coping with the Stress of an ADHD Diagnosis in College Students: A Mixed Method Approach

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Introduction

- ADHD in college can lead to a variety of functional impairments, negative outcomes, and poor adjustment in social, psychological, and academic domains (Canu et al., 2021).
- College students with ADHD tend to have lower GPAs, higher dropout rates, greater difficulties with social adjustment, lower emotional control, higher rates of comorbid disorders (e.g., anxiety, substance use), and take longer to graduate than their non-ADHD peers (Eddy et al., 2021).
- Relatively little research has focused on the specific coping strategies college students with ADHD utilize to manage the stress of having ADHD in college. Most studies either focus too broadly on all adults with ADHD (e.g., Barra et al., 2021; Young, 2005) or on college students in general (e.g., Freire et al., 2020; Pickens et al., 2019).
- The few studies that do specifically examine coping strategies in college students with ADHD tend to focus narrowly on academic coping strategies and skills (e.g., de Oliveira & Dias, 2017), despite evidence that ADHD negatively affects college students beyond academic functioning.
- The present study investigated the specific strategies students with ADHD use to cope with the stress of having ADHD in college. These findings may offer treatment implications for college campuses.

Method

- Participants: Thirty-eight undergraduate college students were interviewed and completed measures. Ten of those 41 interviews were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006).
- Measures: A demographic form created for this study obtained age, racial, ethnic, and gender identity.
- The Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) is a self-report, 28-item, Likert-style inventory that assessed coping styles and different responses to stress. Scores range from 1-4, with higher scores indicating more frequent use of a coping strategy. The Brief COPE consists of 14 subscales of two items. Subscales (Range: 2-8) can be derived into Adaptive (Range: 16-64) and Maladaptive (Range: 12-48) Coping (Mahnoud et al., 2012).
- Students were prompted with: “How do you cope with the stress of being a college student?”
- A semi-structured interview guide was created for the study with the following domains: Transition to College; Feelings and Communication; Coping Strategies; Support; On-Campus Service Use; Ideas for Improvements; Future Directions.
- Three “Support” section questions were analyzed for this study:
  - (1) What strategies or skills do you have in place to help yourself be more successful?
  - (2) What do you do to manage stress and cope with challenges?
  - (3) What strategies do you believe you need to be more successful in college?
- Procedures: Undergraduate students enrolled in a psychology service-learning course conducted a Needs Assessment of college students with ADHD. The study was IRB approved.
- Participants were recruited through campus flyers. Participants consented to an audio-recorded-in-person interview, completed pen-and-paper measures, and received a gift bag for participation. Interview length ranged from 32min to 2h.

Analytical Plan

- Quantitative data for all 41 participants analyzed in SPSS
- Researchers attended a 3h coding training led by Dr. Girio-Herrera

Results

- Key Findings: Uniquely, results showed significantly higher frequency of adaptive than maladaptive coping among college students with ADHD, which differs from the literature on coping strategies for children (Hampel & Desman, 2006). Hampel et al. (2008) and adults (Barra et al., 2021; Young, 2005). Our mixed methodology supports this hypothesis, with the Brief COPE Planning subscale and Thematic Analysis (TA) revealing. Although all students reported using strategies of seeking emotional support (Brief COPE), the TA revealed students have difficulty reaching out even when they know it may be beneficial. Students identified environments that may increase productivity and social connectivity despite recognizing it could be helpful.

- Multiple-Role Coping Strategies: Some reported different applications of the same strategy (e.g., focus or relaxation, sleep for health or avoidance, stress as a source of motivation or paralysis).

- Themes from Qualitative Analysis

  - Reducing Forgettingfulness: Forgetting was the most prominent concern, with most strategies focused on reducing this challenge (e.g., alarms, reminders, visual aids, notes or lists written down).
  - Writing Lists and Crossing Off: Reported this strategy as rewarding to “even feel like I did [a task],” and yet need further assistance with this strategy.
  - Increasing Productivity: Reported changing their work environment to increase productivity (e.g., working with or around others, not working in bed or at home). Reported benefiting from being near others while doing schoolwork.

- Developing a coping strategy framework based on the Brief COPE Planning subscale and Thematic Analysis (TA) revealing: Although all students reported using strategies of seeking emotional support (Brief COPE), the TA revealed students have difficulty reaching out even when they know it may be beneficial.

- Students identified environments that may increase productivity and described body-doubling even if not using the terminology.

- Limitations: The TA of interview data includes only 10 of 41 interviews and only the questions listed in the method. Thus, the final analysis may result in changes to the themes and interpretation.

- Future Directions and Clinical Implications: (1) Previous literature indicates decreasing maladaptive coping is more predictive than adaptive coping in reducing unwanted anxiety, depression, and stress in college students with ADHD (Betti et al., 2021; Mahnoud et al., 2012). Future research should examine ways to counteract students’ maladaptive coping and examine its impact on stress and ADHD impairment. (2) University students currently do not offer support for students with ADHD outside of accommodations and general counseling. However, results indicate students with ADHD may benefit from additional support on campus, as they perceive having poor stress-management despite higher adaptive coping scores. This could include services to assist with OITD offer environments that promote productivity (e.g., body-doubling opportunities), and provide support in reaching out for help and reducing maladaptive coping.

References