

**How problem focused and emotion focused coping affects college students'  
perceived stress and life satisfaction.**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to investigate the coping strategies adopted by college students in Ireland and how these coping strategies affect student's levels of perceived stress and life satisfaction. Data from 150 college students (male=74,female=76) was used throughout the study which required each participant to complete an online questionnaire which consisted of a consent form, a brief demographics questionnaire, a modified version of the brief cope, the perceived stress scale and the satisfaction with life scale. The results found that college student in Ireland, both male and female, are experiencing stress levels above average and have average life satisfaction levels. Female students were found to be significantly more stressed than males who were found to engage in more active emotion focused coping than females. High usage of avoidant focused coping mechanisms was significantly related to high levels of stress and lower life satisfaction.

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## **Introduction**

Up until recently the impact of excess level of stress in the lives of students had been somewhat overlooked. Now, as stress levels in students begin to reach worryingly high levels, the issue of student stress has been brought to light. Over the past decade or so, many researchers have been carrying out investigations in order to understand more specifically what effect these high levels of stress are having on students lives both academically and non-academically and how these levels of stress can be reduced. The work of researchers such as Mahmoud et al. (2012), Hamarat et al. (2012) Huebner et al. (2006) and Valois et al. (2001) has helped us to gain some insight on the detrimental effects stress has on the lives of students which range from headaches, insomnia, anxiety, poor academic performance, poor interpersonal relationships, to anti-social behaviour, vandalism, theft and violence and even depression and suicide. This study hopes to contribute to the current knowledge as to what extent stress effects the lives of students.

Every day we are faced with problems, challenges and obstacles, otherwise known as stressors, which result in stressful situations. Individual coping strategies are crucial to how a person experiences these stressors. Whether we realise it or not, each time we are faced with a stressor, or a stressful situation, we choose a coping strategy in order to deal with it. Some people choose to get upset about the situation, or turn to family and friends for social support whereas others choose to act directly against the source of the stress in order to reduce or eliminate its effects by devising plans, asking people for help and so forth. These coping resources can be useful in decreasing stress levels and in turn improving both emotional health and well being, but only if they are understood and used properly and appropriately. If used incorrectly coping strategies may become counteractive and result in higher levels of

stress. The current study focuses on the coping strategies adopted by college students in Ireland and the affect they have on students' perceived stress and satisfaction with life.

### **i. Stress**

Stress is a psychological and/or physical strain that if not dealt with properly can leave us feeling anxious, nervous, tired and depressed. If prolonged stress may lead to serious long term physical and mental health issues and has been linked to the onset of diseases such as cardiovascular conditions (Benschop et al., 1998; Dimsdale, Ruberman and Carleton, 1987; Ornish, 2007; Ornish, Scherwitz, & Doody, 1983; Pashkow, 1999), cancer (Cohen & Rabin, 1998; Siegel, 1986), breast cancer (Antonova & Mueller, 2008) as well as increasing the severity of symptoms such as asthma (Fitzgerald, 2009; Wright, Rodriquez, & Cohen, 1998) depression, anxiety, arthritis (Crofford, Jacobson, & Young, 1999; Straub, Dhabhar, Bijlsma, & Cutolo, 2005), and skin disorders (Lebwohl & Tan, 1998). Stress has also been linked to symptomatic experiences such as headaches (Davis, Holm, Myers, & Suda, 1998; Fanciullacci, Alessandri, & Fanciullacci, 1998; Armstrong, Wittrock, Robinson, 2006; Bjorling, 2009), insomnia (Vgontzas et al., 1998), and fatigue (Maes, 2009). Although today the word stress is a part of our everyday vocabulary, and has been in scientific literature since the 1930s, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that stress became popular vernacular (Rice, 2012, p2).

### **ii. Theories of Stress.**

We are indebted to Hans Selye (1956) for popularising the concept of stress (Goldstein & Kopin, 2007). Often referred to as the father of stress research, Selye was a pioneer in the development and testing of theory in relation to stress from a physiological and medical perspective. Selye (1974) believed that stress was the 'non specific response of the

body to any demand upon it' - by 'non specific' meaning a set of shared elements of responses- regardless of the nature of the stressor (Goldstein & Kopin, 2007). Selye developed his General Adaptation Syndrome theory (GAS) in which he proposed three universal stages in an attempt to explain how we cope with a stressor.

In his GAS theory Selye put forward his idea that there are three stages in the stress process; the alarm reaction stage, the stage of resistance and exhaustion. The alarm stage is elicited immediately after the stressful event occurs when the body goes into a state of heightened physiological and psychological arousal. This stage is often referred to as fight or flight because it is characterized by biological changes, such as our heart racing and breathing quickening, that prepare the body to deal with a threat by either fighting it off or fleeing from it. The following stage is the resistance stage which involves coping with the stressor and attempting to reverse the effects produced by the alarm stage and by bringing the body back to its normal biological state. Finally, the stage of exhaustion occurs when an individual's ability to resist a stressor has been depleted due to repeated exposure to one particular or several different stressors and can result in depression, illness and in some cases, death.

Although Selye's GAS theory laid important foundations for stress research, it had a number of limitations which resulted in much criticism. The main problems with this theory was its suggestion that the stress response is a universal response and therefore it did not address the issue of individual variability and that it is also suggested that changes in physiology are the same regardless of the nature of the stressor. These limitations caused Selye's theory to lose much of its credibility.

### **iii. Lazarus' Theory.**

Perhaps the most influential theory of stress is that which was developed by social-personality psychologist, Richard Lazarus. The Cognitive Transactional Model of Stress, proposed by Lazarus and his colleagues (eg. Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) remains one of the most influential theories of stress to date. According to Lazarus, stress is a result of a transaction between an individual's characteristics and appraisals, the event environment and the internal or external responses available to the person (Morrisson and Bennett, 2009). Lazarus argued that the stress response was elicited when the individual appraised a potentially stressful event as being stressful (Ogden, 2004, p239). In his theory Lazarus emphasizes the influence appraisals have on our perceived stress and suggests that the interpretation of stressful events is more important than the events themselves. For example a student who appraises an upcoming exam as being stressful is likely to have higher stress levels than a student who considers the same exam as an opportunity to shine. This difference in stress levels is due to the way the students are appraising the upcoming situation.

Lazarus' cognitive transactional model of stress consists of two types of appraisals; Primary Appraisal and Secondary Appraisal.

Primary appraisal involves determining whether or not an event is stressful. This involves categorising the event as being positive, irrelevant or stressful. If the event is determined as being stressful it must then be evaluated whether the stressor poses harm/loss, threat or challenge to the individual. Harm/loss refers to loss or damage that has already been done i.e. illness or injury. Threat refers to the expectation of future harm. Finally challenge refers to a person's confidence in overcoming difficult demands (Brannon & Feist, 2007).

Secondary Appraisal occurs after the initial appraisal of the event. During Secondary Appraisal the individual forms an impression of their ability to control or cope with the stressor. This has a great impact on stress levels. If a person feels like they can successfully cope with a situation stress levels are reduced. However, if a person doubts their ability to control or cope with a situation stress levels are increased.

The work of researchers such as Seyle and Lazarus and Folkman drew a lot of attention to the concept of stress which has since been the subject of a great amount of scientific research. More recently a particular area of stress which has sparked a lot of interest and has begun to gain more and more scientific research is student stress.

#### **iv. Student Stress**

College is a transitional period when students of all ages undergo new experiences, meet new people and face opportunities which may compound the stress in their lives (Lindsay et al, 2011). There are many factors in student's daily lives which can contribute to elevated levels of stress. For example, increased academic work load, being away from home, finding and maintaining a job, maintaining personal relationships, financial obligations, becoming acclimated to a new environment (Negga, Applewhite, Livingston, 2007), along with grade competition, increased complexity of learning material, and social adjustment are just some of the obstacles that students today deal with on a daily basis therefore it is hardly surprising that recent research conducted by Mahmoud et al.(2012) indicates that college students experience increased levels of depression, anxiety and stress.

The findings of Mahmoud et al. (2012) support previous studies by Bean and Hammer (2006) and Ji (2011) that student stress is a growing problem. In 2006 a study conducted by Bean and Hammer examined students stress in relation to academic workload and found that

42% of students reported feeling moderate stress while 27% reported their stress levels as being unmanageable. A 2008 study on student numbers in Chinese colleges found that 54.4% of college drop outs in China are due to overwhelming stress (Ji, 2011).

The effects caused by stress in students can not only be a danger to student's health, both physically and mentally, but can also have negative academic effects. When stress is perceived negatively or becomes excessive, students experience physical and psychological impairment (Murphy & Archer, 1996). Stress impairs mental concentration, problem solving, decision making, and the ability to get work done in an efficient and effective manner (Barling, Kelloway, & Frone, 2004; Goleman & Gurin, 1993; Ornstein & Sobel, 1988; Pelletier, 1992, 1995; Thompson, 2010). Stress may also negatively affect exam performance, class attendance, energy and focus as well as personal relationships both at home and in college.

Harnish et al. (2000) argue that effective coping terminates, minimises or shortens the effects of the stressor therefore it may be possible that these findings, as well as those which suggest that student stress is a growing problem, are due to student's lack of available coping resources and lack of understanding in relation to applying their coping resources in order to successfully deal with stress.

#### **v. Coping**

Lazarus and colleagues (1978) defined coping as the process of managing stressors that have been appraised as taxing or exceeding a person's resources and as the efforts to manage environmental and internal demands (Lazarus and Launier, 1978, as cited in Ogden, 2004).

Denial, religion, acceptance, disengagement, drugs, humour, seeking emotional and instrumental social support and planning are all examples of different kinds of coping resources. Past studies have shown that students use various coping strategies in order to cope with stress (Doronh et.al, 2009) and that in general females tend to be more likely to express emotion and seek social support in order to cope with stressful situations. Although there are several ways of categorising coping strategies most coping responses are considered to broadly encompass Lazarus and Folkman's (1980) problem focused or emotion-focused coping strategies, which will be the categorisations used in the current study (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

#### **vi. Coping Strategies and their uses.**

Coping strategies are said to have two primary functions; the first is to manage problems which are causing stress to an individual and the second is to govern the emotions which are related to these stressors (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 86, Lazarus and Folkman 1984, Lazarus 1990). As previously mentioned Folkman and Lazarus (1980) categorised coping strategies into two categories; Problem-focused and Emotion-focused coping.

- a) Problem-focused coping is generally viewed as an adaptive mode of coping that involves actively planning or engaging in a specific behaviour to overcome the problem causing distress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Examples of problem focused coping include planning, active coping, and using instrumental support such as supervisors and mentors. An example of problem focused coping would be devising and sticking to a study plan in preparation for an exam which has been perceived as stressful.

b) Emotion- focused coping, seems to develop in adolescence (Compass et al 1991,1996). This type of coping involves attempts regulate the emotions evoked by the occurrence of a stressful event and can be considered active or avoidant (Holahan & Moos, 1987). Emotion focused coping may involve the use of behavioural and/or cognitive strategies such as receiving emotional support from friends and family and positive reframing (Ogden,2004, p270).

Emotion focused coping strategies are often divided into two sub categories; active emotion focused coping and avoidant emotion focused coping. Active emotion focused coping such as positive reframing, is generally viewed as being an adaptive emotion regulation strategy whereas avoidant emotion focused coping such as self distraction where one tries to avoid the stressor is seen to be maladaptive (Folkman & Lazarus,1985),(Holahan & Moos, 1987).

Research carried out by Folkman and Lazarus (1980) and Hamilton and Fagot (1988) found no gender difference in relation to the use of problem focused and emotion focused coping. However Stone and Neale (1984) found that men are more likely to take direct action and engage in problem focused coping strategies.

Though it may seem that problem focused coping would be the more favourable coping strategy, this is not always the case. Often, the usefulness and successfulness of a certain coping strategy is determined by the situation in which it is applied to. For example, creating a study plan in order to deal with exam stress may be a better way of coping than going round to a friend's house and venting about the exam, however in the case of the death of a family member, social support may be a better alternative than making a step by step plan of grieving. It is hoped that the results of the current study will increase our knowledge

in terms of which coping strategies are more successful when applied to college stressors however, it is important to keep in mind that, as stated by Aldwin and Park (2004), there is no 'magic bullet' strategy when it comes to coping with stress and that over reliance on either type of coping strategy may lead to mental health problems (Holahan & Moos, 1987), (Schnider, Elhai and Gray,2007). According to Yarcheski et al. (2001) students who possess a rich repertoire of coping resources are likely to cope more successfully with stressors imposed by the college setting, and this superior coping strategy is likely to be reflected in higher levels of satisfaction with life.

#### **vii. Satisfaction with Life**

Satisfaction with life is defined as a cognitive evaluation of one's life as a whole and/or of specific life domains (Huebner et al., 2005; Myers and Diener, 1995).It refers to a judgmental process, in which individuals assess the quality of their lives on the basis of their own unique set of criteria ( Shin & Johnson, 1978). According to Pavot and Diener (1993) a comparison of one's perceived life circumstances with a self-imposed standard or set of standards is presumably made, and to the degree that conditions match these standards, the person reports high life satisfaction.

Although it was in the 1980's and 1990's there was a surge in research on the construct of well being, still today there has been very limited research on that of young adults, adolescence and students and even less research on young adults, adolescence and students in Ireland. What we do know, from the research which has been conducted on the subject of satisfaction with life is that the affects produced by low levels of life satisfaction are frightening. For example research conducted by Valois et al. (2001) has shown that adolescents who have low life satisfaction levels are more prone to violence, destructive and risky behaviours, stealing and robbery .Compare this to the research carried out by Gilman &

Huebner (2006) who found high levels of satisfaction with life to be positively related to higher academic performance, interpersonal relationships, parental relationships and self esteem. It was also found that high levels of satisfaction with life were negatively correlated with poor attitudes towards teachers and school, social stress, anxiety and depression. This also supports the findings of Koivumaa-Honkanen et al. (2001) who found that low levels of satisfaction with life increased the risk of depression and suicide.

Hamarat et al.(2012) found there to be a significant negative correlation between perceived stress scale (PSS) scores and satisfaction with life (SWLS) scores. Their results indicate that those whose results show high levels of perceived stress are more likely to have lower levels of satisfaction with life. This is a disturbing finding in relation to the previously mentioned results relating college students to increased levels of stress. The relationship between college students' levels stress and life satisfaction will be investigated in current study along with how their coping strategies affect these levels.

It is reassuring to note that literature suggests that most students report a positive level of life satisfaction. A study conducted by Huebner, Drane and Valois (2000) who found that of 5,544 American students who participated in a survey 11% of those sampled fell below the neutral point of satisfaction with life with 7% indicating a 'terrible' or 'unhappy existence'.

At present there is very limited research on the effects that coping methods have on students levels of perceived stress and life satisfaction, particularly in Ireland. The aim of the current study is to investigate the relationship between emotion focused and problem focused coping strategies on perceived stress and life satisfaction in college students.

The previously mentioned studies indicate that there may be a significant relationship between these variables and are the basis of the hypotheses for this study. It is hypothesised that there will be; a significant relationship between the perceived stress levels and levels of

satisfaction, a significant relationship between perceived stress and problem focused coping, a significant relationship between perceived stress and emotion focused coping and that perceived stress and problem focused coping will significant predict life satisfaction as will perceived stress and emotion focused coping.

A convenience sample of approximately 150 college students will be asked to complete an online questionnaire consisting of a modified for purpose version of the Brief Cope Scale (Carver,1997), the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1983) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diner et al. 1987). Participants will also be asked to complete a brief demographics form which will then be used when looking at gender differences in coping strategies.

This investigation will be carried out in the hope of enhancing current knowledge on how college students in Ireland cope with stress and how this effects their life satisfaction. Should this investigation yield significant results, it could be used to help colleges across Ireland acknowledge the perceived stress levels of their students and give them a guide line as to how they can contribute to reducing student stress levels and, in turn, improve the college experience for students, lower absenteeism and drop out numbers and improve student's academic performance by enhancing concentration levels, problem solving abilities and decision making, reduce the risk of anti-social behaviour such as violence and theft and arguably most importantly reduce the risks of depression and suicide.

## **Methodology**

### **i. Participants**

The sample began with 151 participants all gained through convenience sample. One female participant was eliminated due to missing data. The remaining sample of 150 participants (Male= 74, Female=76) were between the ages of 18-29 (Mean age=20.72, SD=1.49) and were all attending college in Ireland at the time of participation. Demographic variables including gender, age, college of attendance, current year in college, and duration of college course were also gathered

### **ii. Measures**

#### **The Perceived Stress Scale**

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is the most widely used psychological instrument for measuring the perception of stress. Cohen et al. (1983) found the PSS to provide better predictions of psychological symptoms, physical symptoms and utilisation of health services than other instruments which measure specific life events (Hamarat et al., 2001). The instrument, which was designed for use in the community samples with at least a junior high school education, consists of 10 items designed to measure how unpredictable, uncontrollable and overloaded respondents find their lives to be. Items include statements such as; in the past month, how often have you felt your difficulties were piling up so high you could not overcome them? Prior to beginning the PSS participants are instructed to indicate how often in the past month they have felt or thought a certain way on a scale of 0-4 (0= never, 4= very often). Coefficient alpha reliabilities for the PSS range between .84 and .86, and the measure correlates with physical and depressive symptomatology measures between .52 and .70, and .65 and .76 respectively (Hamarat et al.,2001).

### **The Satisfaction with life Scale**

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) was designed to address the concept of life satisfaction as a whole rather than to assess satisfaction with sub-dimensions of life (Diener et al, 1985). The 5 item instrument contains statements such as 'I am satisfied with my life' which participants are instructed to evaluate on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The SWLS demonstrates strong internal reliability (.80 to .89) and moderate temporal stability (.64 to .84) (Hamarat et al.,2001).

### **Brief Cope**

The brief cope is an abbreviated version of the COPE Inventory. The Brief Cope is a 28 item measure of coping style use using a 4 point Likert Scale ranging from 'I haven't been doing this at all' to 'I've been doing this a lot' to query a variety of different coping methods such as praying or meditating, receiving emotional support, substance abuse, self blame, self criticism, planning, acceptance and positive reframing. The Brief Cope consists of 14 subscales containing two items each (Schnider, Elhai and Gray,2007, p346). For the purpose of this study a modified version of the brief cope, consisting of 21 questions was used. Questions were measured on a five point Likert Scale ranging from 'never' to 'always'. Based on conceptual and empirical literature describing the three coping strategies summarized above (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Holahan & Moos, 1987), we rationally grouped the 14 subscales into these three coping categories by summing items accordingly (with higher scores indicating greater intensity of use of the coping strategy) (Schnider, Elhai and Gray,2007, p346). Questions measured the use of Problem Focused coping such as active coping, planning and instrumental support, and Emotion Focused coping such as emotional support, substance use, and positive reframing. Emotion

Focused Coping was later divided into two sub categories ‘Active Emotion’ coping strategies such as acceptance, emotional support, positive reframing and humour, and ‘Avoidant Emotion’ self distraction, behavioural disengagement, self blame, and substance use (Schnider, Elhai and Gray, 2007).

### **iii. Procedure**

All questionnaires were distributed online in order to access a wider variety of students attending colleges across the whole of Ireland and not just in Dublin. Before beginning the questionnaire participants were first given a consent form which outlined the conditions of participation and the purpose of the study. If, after reading the consent form, participants agreed to take part in the study the measurement instruments were then given in the following order: Demographics questionnaire, a modified version of the brief cope, PSS and the SWLS. Each instrument was accompanied by a set of instructions explaining how the questionnaire should be answered. Once all the data had been collected it was then downloaded and input into SPSS 18 in order to be analysed.

### **iv. Data Analysis**

Data will be analysed using SPSS. Normality tests, descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, pearsons correlations and multiple regression tests will be used in order to test the hypotheses and carry out exploratory investigations for this research.

### **v. Design**

A mixed research design will be used for this study. A correlational analysis of data will be used to find the relationship between emotion focused and problem focused coping

methods and perceived stress. A causal analysis of data will be used to compute whether perceived stress and coping strategies are predictors of satisfaction with life. Differences between male and female participants will also be looked at as an exploratory investigation.

## Results

The data was examined using four types of procedures: pearsons correlation was run between coping strategies, PSS and the SWLS; regression analysis examining the effect of perceived stress and coping strategies on SWLS scores; independent samples t-tests to examine genders differences across all variables, and descriptive statistics.

### Descriptive Statistics

A total of 150 college students (Male= 74, Female=76) participated in this study. The age of participants ranged from 18-29 (Mean age=20.72, SD=1.49). The average scores for each of the variables measured are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics of psychological measures*

<b>Varibales</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
<b>Perceived Stress</b>	19.23	21.30
<b>Satisfaction with Life</b>	22.60	6.22
<b>Problem Focused Coping</b>	11.77	2.67
<b>Emotion Focused Coping</b>	44.57	5.33

### Inferential Statistics

Using an independent samples t-test we found that female students were significantly more stress than male students ( $t(148) = -3.91, p < .01$ ). Female participants scores fell into the ‘much higher than average’ category for PSS results whereas male participants scores fell into the ‘slightly higher than average’ category. Independent samples t-tests (table 1) also showed that male students were significantly more likely to engage in active emotion focused

coping than female students ( $t(148)=2.23, p=0.027$ ). However there was no significant difference found between male and female usage of any of the other coping strategies that were tested for.

Table 2: An independent samples T-test table displaying gender differences in coping styles

Variables	Gender	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Problem Focused</b>	Male	11.80	2.83	.138	148	.890
	Female	11.74	2.52			
<b>Emotion Focused</b>	Male	45.27	5.40	1.60	148	.111
	Female	43.88	5.20			
<b>Avoidant Emotion</b>	Male	24.60	3.98	.427	148	.670
	Female	24.34	3.65			
<b>Active Emotion</b>	Male	20.66	3.15	2.23	148	.027
	Female	19.54	3.01			

Note: *p* is significant at .05 level.

Pearsons correlations were carried out to test the hypotheses that there would be; a significant relationship between PSS and SWLS, a significant relationship between PSS and Emotion focused coping, and a significant relationship between PSS and problem focused coping. In order to gain a more specific insight to coping strategies emotion focused coping was then sub divided into active emotion focused coping and avoidant emotion focused coping. The affects of these sub divisions were then investigated using pearsons correlations.

A pearsons correlation coefficient found that there was a moderate negative significant relationship between Perceived Stress and Life Satisfaction ( $r(148)=-.32, p<.01$ ) (as shown in table 3). The negative correlation is due to high levels of perceived

stress scores resulting in lower levels of life satisfaction. Therefore the null hypothesis is rejected.

The PSS also had significant correlations with emotion focused coping) (*as shown in table 3*) showing a weak positive significant relationship (  $r(148)=.259, p=.001$ ) indicating that as the use of emotion focused coping increases so does perceived stress levels. Only one of the subcategories of emotion focused coping showed significant results with the PSS. Avoidant emotion focused coping had a moderate positive relationship with the PSS ( $r(148)=.351, p<.001$ ) again indicating that as the use of avoidant emotion focused coping increases so does perceived stress. There was no significant relation found between active emotion focused coping and perceived stress scores ( $r(148) =-.014, p=.865$ ) or problem focused coping ( $r(148)=-.141, p=.086$ ) (*shown in table 3*). The significant relationship shown between perceived stress results and emotion focused coping support our hypothesis, therefore the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 3: A pearsons correlation table displaying the correlations between emotion focused coping, problem focused coping, perceived stress and life satisfaction

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Emofocus</b>	<b>Probfocus</b>	<b>PSS</b>	<b>LifeSat</b>
<b>Emofocus</b>	1			
<b>Prob focus</b>	.154	1		
<b>PSS</b>	.259**	.092	1	
<b>Lifesat</b>	-.204	.141	-.320**	1

\* $p$  is significant at .05 level,

\*\*  $p$  is significant at .01

The results of life satisfaction and coping strategies were then examined as part of an exploratory investigation. Life Satisfaction was found to have a moderate negative significance with avoidant emotion focused coping ( $r(148)=-.396, p<.001$ ). Emotion focused

coping was found to have a weak negative significant relationship with SWL ( $r(148)=-.204, p=.012$ ). Neither problem focused ( $r(148)=.141, p=.086$ ) or active emotional focused coping ( $r(148)=.134, p=.102$ ) had a significant relationship with SWL.

Additional exploratory tests then were run using Pearson's correlations in order to investigate whether high usage of combined coping strategies significantly affected PSS and SWLS. When problem focused coping was combined with avoidant emotional coping there was a moderate positive significant relationship with PSS ( $r(148)=.351, p<.001$ ) but no significant relationship with PSS when problem focused coping was combined with active emotion coping ( $r(148)=.061, p=.458$ ). Problem focused coping when combined with active emotion focused coping significantly correlated positively with life satisfaction ( $r(148)=.167, p=.041$ ) whilst problem focused when combined with avoidant emotion focused coping significantly correlated negatively with SWL ( $r(148)=-.251, p=.002$ ).

It was also hypothesised that PSS and problem focused coping would predict SWL as would PSS and emotion focused coping.

Multiple Regressions were computed to examine the effects of perceived stress levels and coping strategies upon satisfaction with life. The results of the regression indicated that two predictors explained 12% of the variance ( $R^2 = .12, F(2, 147) = 11.13, p < .001$ ). It was found that perceived stress significantly predicted satisfaction with life ( $\beta = -.336, p = <.001, 95\% \text{ CI} = -.442 - -.166$ ) as did problem focused coping ( $\beta = .172, p = .028, 95\% \text{ CI} = .045-.757$ ). Therefore the null hypothesis cannot be accepted.

A second multiple regression was used to test whether perceived stress and emotion focused coping were predictors of satisfaction with life. The results of the regression indicated that two predictors explained 11% of the variance ( $R^2 = .11, F(2, 147) = 9.84, p <$

.001). It was found that perceived stress significantly predicted satisfaction with life ( $\beta = -.286$ ,  $p = <.001$ , 95% CI =  $-.403 - -.116$ ) unlike emotion focused coping ( $\beta = .130$ ,  $p = .108$ , 95% CI =  $-.337 - .034$ ). In this case the null hypothesis is accepted.

The results supported our hypotheses that there would be a significant relationship between PSS and SWL, that there would be a significant relationship between PSS and emotion focused coping and that PSS and Problem focused coping would have a significant effect in predicting life satisfaction. Additional tests were also run for the purpose of exploratory investigations. These exploratory tests produced some interesting results which will later be discussed along with our main findings.

## Discussion

The aim of the current study was to investigate the coping strategies adopted by students in college in Ireland and how these coping strategies affect student stress and satisfaction with life.

The results of this study have highlighted that student stress is a serious problem in colleges across Ireland at present. Both male and female student stress scores were found to be above the baseline average. Male student's perceived stress levels were found to be in the '*slightly higher than average*' category whereas female students were found to be significantly higher with average scores falling into the '*much higher than average*' category. Overall, over 70% of participants were found to have perceived stress levels above the scale average. These results support those of Mahmoud et al. (2012), Ji, (2011) and Bean and Hammer (2006) who also found student stress levels to be reaching dangerously high levels. High levels of stress has been linked to symptomatic experiences such as headaches, hyperventilation, insomnia, fatigue, and nervousness and may also put students at risk of developing serious health conditions such as depression, anxiety and, in the long run, cardiovascular conditions.

These high levels of student stress are a particularly worrying revelation when combined with further findings of the study which revealed perceived stress to have a significant negative correlation with life satisfaction. This result supports the findings of Hamarat et al. (2012). At the point is it important to recall previously mentioned studies by Valois (2001), Gilman and Huebner (2006) and Koivumaa-Honkanen et al. (2001) who found low levels of life satisfaction to be related to poor attitudes towards school and towards teachers, social stress, antisocial behaviours such as robbery, violent behaviour, poor health

behaviours, anxiety depression and suicide. These findings highlight the extent of how important it is to acknowledge the current problem of student stress levels in Ireland.

The effects student coping strategies had on their levels of perceived stress and life satisfaction produced some interesting results. Emotion focused coping showed weak negative significant correlations with life satisfaction and weak positive correlations with perceived stress, which supports the original hypothesis. In order to explore these findings in greater detail emotion focused coping was divided into its sub categories of avoidant emotion focused coping and active emotion focused coping, each of which yielded different results.

Avoidant emotion focused coping significantly correlated with perceived stress scores positively indicating that the use of avoidant emotion focused coping may be counter active in dealing with stress as results show students who reported high usage of these coping strategies were more likely to have higher levels of perceived stress. Unlike avoidant emotion focused coping, active emotion focused coping did not have a significant relationship with perceived stress.

Male students were found to have slightly higher levels of satisfaction with life than female students however overall students satisfaction with life scores were within the average score range. Contrary to the findings of Folkman and Lazarus(1980) , Hamilton and Fagot(1988) and Neale and Stone(1984), a significant gender difference was found in regards to the use of coping strategies with male students being found to engage in active emotion focused coping strategies significantly more than female students.

Although a relationship between satisfaction with life and coping strategies was not a part of an original hypothesis of this study the relationship was investigated for exploratory reasons. Again, avoidant emotion focused coping yielded significant results. A weak negative

significant relationship was found between avoidant emotion focused coping and satisfaction with life. When combined with the results of the correlation between avoidant emotion focused coping with levels of perceived stress, this correlation with satisfaction with life indicates that avoidant emotion focused coping seems to act counteractively and produce unfavourable results. It is important for students in both colleges and schools all across Ireland to acknowledge and become more aware of the defects caused by this style of coping, again in relation to the consequences high levels of stress and low levels of life satisfaction can have on student's academia and overall mental health and well being.

Active emotion focused coping did not correlate significantly with either perceived stress scores or satisfaction with life however, male students were found to be more likely to engage in active emotion focused coping strategies such as humour, acceptance, and the use of emotional support.

Further exploratory tests were run in order to test the affects of combined coping strategies. The results of this study showed that a combination of coping strategies can also affect perceived stress levels and levels of life satisfaction. The use of problem focused coping when combined with avoidant emotion coping showed significant negative correlations with life satisfaction and significantly positive correlations with perceived stress. Whereas the use of problem focused coping when combined with active emotion coping was significantly related positively with life satisfaction.

### **Limitations of the study**

It is important, upon reading the results of this study, to be aware of the limitations which lie within it. The limitations of this study are as follows:

The majority of data collection for this study took place throughout the month of January. For many colleges the month of January is an examination month where it is possible that those students who were preparing for upcoming examinations were feeling exceptionally stressed. This may have affected our results as students may have reported perceived stress scores as being higher and life satisfaction scores as being lower than they would report if they were not preparing for such examinations. This also applies in reverse to students who were examined before the Christmas mid-term. Having completed examinations and had the Christmas break to relax, it may be possible that these students were feeling less stressed than they would be during a college term. This may have resulted in these students reporting stress scores as being lower and life satisfaction scores as being higher due to the circumstances at the time. In order to avoid this limitation from affecting future research, future researchers should spread out the distribution and collection of data across the college year.

Although the questionnaires were distributed online in order to access a variety of colleges from all over Ireland and not just within Dublin Business School and although students from a large variety of colleges responded, the vast majority of these students were attending college in Dublin. This may have affected our results by giving them a Dublin college bias. Future studies could address this problem by gaining access to a wider variety of colleges throughout Ireland. The current study mainly used social networking sites in order to gain access but different college forums, online notices boards and college chat rooms may expand accessibility to more students from a wider range of colleges across Ireland.

The age range of participants was from 18 to 29 years old. This narrow age range restricted our findings from going beyond the age of 30 even though there are undoubtedly students in Ireland above this age. This limitation gives results that are subject to an age bias

and may vary if the age range was widened. This limitation could be addressed in future studies by accessing mature students possibly in night courses and/ or part time courses. However it is important to note that mature students attending night courses or part-time courses may have external variables such as children or full time jobs, which may affect their results.

Less than a fifth of the total variance of satisfaction with life was accounted for by the variables included in this study. By exploring and including additional variables such as social demographics, personality types and grade performance, future studies may be able to account for a larger amount of the total variance and expand our current knowledge of the factors contributing to satisfaction with life.

In general, research participants who are participating in self report research want to respond in a way that makes them look as good as possible by answering questions in what they see as the most desirable way possible to both themselves and the researcher. This study relied solely on self report measures for both the predictor and the criterion variables which means it is possible that the results gathered were affected by self report bias and also a mono method bias. In order to control for self report bias in future research, researchers could include a lie scale in their research which would enable them to detect by how much someone is answering according to desirability.

Future research could address this study's mono method limitation through the use of cross-sectional surveys that employ self-assessment in addition to other convergent non-self-report measurement (Diener et al., 1999). For example by following college students throughout their college careers using self-reports in addition to independent ratings to obtain

longitudinal information about the variables underlying life satisfaction during this window of time (Duffy, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

It is important that not only colleges throughout Ireland but also students, health services and even parents acknowledge the current student stress dilemma and begin to take action against it. As previously mentioned stress can have an array of implications on student's physical and mental health and well being as well as academic performance and attendance. By making students aware of the importance of coping strategies colleges can contribute to reducing student stress levels, increasing satisfaction with life in students and in turn increasing attendance levels, improving academic performance, improving interpersonal relationships, reducing the level of college drop outs and reducing the occurrence of both symptomatic experiences, such as headache and insomnia and reduce the risk of developing depression, poor health behaviours and suicides.

In sum, this study provides a brief snapshot of the life satisfaction and perceived stress levels of college students in Ireland, as well as the coping mechanisms they are utilising in order to deal with their stress. It is important to understand what factors relate to perceived stress and satisfaction with life in college students as these may be precursors to future psychological well being and college enjoyment (Elder, 1998; Lee & Gramotnev, 2007). The results of the current study suggest that those who do not engage in avoidant focused coping strategies throughout college will be more likely to have lower perceived stress levels and higher life satisfaction than those who do.

Further research is needed in order to address the limitations of this study. By doing so and introducing unaccounted for variables such as personality types and social

demographic future research can contribute further to our understanding student stress and life satisfaction and how these can be affected by the use of coping strategies.

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## Appendix

### Consent Form

Dear Participant,

Firstly, thank you for considering taking part in my study. My name is Kate Ryan and I am currently a 3rd year psychology student in Dublin Business School. My study focuses on the stress, coping methods and life satisfaction associated with college students in Ireland.

Before beginning this questionnaire it is important that you are aware of the following:  
During the course of this research responses will be kept strictly confidential and none of the data released in this study will identify you by name, or any other identifiable data. This is a voluntary study and should you feel at any stage prior to submitting your completed questionnaire that you no longer want to participate you are free to discontinue your participation and leave. However, due to the anonymity of the study once your completed questionnaire has been received by the researcher it will no longer be possible to withdraw. All data collected during this study will be strictly confidential and will only be accessible to the researcher and the researchers' supervisor.

Please tick the box(es) which apply to you:

I am over the age of 18

I understand the above and am willing to participate in the research project.

## Appendix

### Demographics Form

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

College/ University: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Year in College/University: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix

### **The Brief Cope- *Modified***

These items deal with ways you cope with the stress in your life. Different people deal with problems in different ways. Each item below says something about a particular way of coping. We want to know how often you do what the item says. Make your answers as true FOR YOU as you can.

	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
I turn to activities outside of work to take my mind off things					
I drink alcohol/take drugs in order to think about it less					
I try to take a day off work so I can just relax					
I turn to support from other colleagues at work					
I request more supervision					
I rely on support from my friends and family					
I try to deal with the circumstances of the situation					
I try to come up with new strategies to deal with the problem					
I approach my manager					
I make jokes about the situation					
I give up trying to deal with it					

I blame myself for things that have happened					
I reflect on the situation carefully before deciding what to do					
I pray or meditate					
I accept what has happened and don't attempt to cope with it					
I try to realise that it is not my fault					
I understand that I have a choice and therefore can choose to seek employment elsewhere					
I try to think about it positively					
I blame others for what has happened					
I just switch off at the end of the day and try to leave work at work					
I try to focus on my own professional and personal development					

## Appendix

### Perceived Stress Scale

Instructions: The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month, in each case you will be asked to how often you felt or thought a certain way.

For each question circle one of the following:

0=Never      1=Sometimes      2=Often      3=Fairly Often      4= Always

In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things you had to do?	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

## Appendix

### Satisfaction with Life Scale

Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1 - 7 scale below, indicate

your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding.

- 7 - Strongly agree
- 6 - Agree
- 5 - Slightly agree
- 4 - Neither agree nor disagree
- 3 - Slightly disagree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly disagree

\_\_\_\_\_ In most ways my life is close to my ideal.

\_\_\_\_\_ The conditions of my life are excellent.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am satisfied with my life.

\_\_\_\_\_ So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

\_\_\_\_\_ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

## Appendix

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Should you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me by phone: or by email:

Should you feel the need to speak to someone about and worries or problems you may be facing here are some contact details for organisations you may find helpful:

Samaritans: Call: 1850609090 or email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

Aware: Call: 1890303302 or email: [wecanhelp@aware.ie](mailto:wecanhelp@aware.ie)