

VANDERBILT



UNIVERSITY

ENHANCING STRESS MANAGEMENT SKILLS IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

What is stress?

Stress can be events, situations, or circumstances that you experience or interpret as:

- Threatening
- Troubling
- Challenging
- Upsetting
- Harmful

Why do we care about stress?

Although not all stress is bad, too much stress can be detrimental to your mental and physical health.

Some consequences of stress:

- Harder to get school work done, academics may suffer
- Both short term and long term health consequences – more susceptible to getting sick in the short term and long term
- Disrupt relationships with others—harder to get along with other people (irritability, anger, impatience)
- Harder to manage emotions (sadness, worries, anger) which can lead to short term and long term effects (mental health problems like depression, substance abuse, eating disorders)
- Inability to enjoy activities
- Poor self care

Stress, coping, and the brain

Studies have shown that stress actually changes the brain – when the brain is under stress, the dendrites actually shrink and therefore brain connectivity is weakened.

When people are under a lot of stress, it actually makes it harder to cope with the stressors of life. Stress impairs the areas of the brain that you are used when coping with stress (e.g., prefrontal cortex).

The good news is that this dendritic reduction is reversible, and can be impacted by teaching better ways to cope with stress.

Putting the pieces together

Research has shown that teaching people coping skills can change the way that they cope with stress. Additionally, preliminary efficacy has been shown for working memory-training programs improving cognitive functioning. However, research has not yet explored the link between training coping skills and executive functioning, and how improvements in either or both of these skills might lead to improvements in overall cognitive and emotional functioning.

Research questions:

- Do changes in executive functioning lead to improvements in coping?
- Do improvements in coping lead to changes in executive functioning?
- Will a combination of coping skills and executive function training lead to a greater improvement in coping and cognitive abilities than coping skills or executive function training alone?

Research

The Stress and Coping Lab, in partnership with the Psychological and Counseling Center will be running a randomized control trial to test the efficacy of a combined coping skills & executive function training program for college students at Vanderbilt University in Fall 2013. Students will be randomized to receive coping skills training only, executive function training only, or a combined coping skills and executive function training program. Students will participate in pre- and post-intervention assessments that will measure students' coping, cognitive function, and mental health outcomes.

If you are interested in learning more information about this research, please contact:

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