

Proposal for Undergraduate Research
**The Relationship between Dispositional Optimism, Support Systems, and Academic
Stress on College Students**

To be performed by

And Faculty Advisor
Scott F. Madey

Relevance and Significance of Topic

Dispositional optimism and having a support system as a college student can influence a student's academic stress. Burris, Brechting, Salsman, and Carlson (2009) investigated different factors that influence a student's psychological distress and found that optimism was the leading factor in having lower levels of psychological distress and was a predictor in psychological well-being. In contrast however, the effects of a support system on a college student have also been shown to result in distress experienced by being in college. For example, Zaleski, Lavery-Thors and Schiaffino (1998) found that students who were closer to their families were experiencing more distress adjusting to college life. On the other hand, the same study found that social support from friends was beneficial to adjustment. Others found that when optimism and social support were compared, a correlation was found between greater optimism and social support and lower levels of stress (Ruthig, Haynes, Stupnisky, Perry, 2009). However, there seems to be a lack of research on whether or not there is a relationship between dispositional optimism (a belief in positive expectancies for one's future), having a support system and how or if these variables affect stress together. Does an optimist with a strong support system tend to have less stress than an optimist that does not have a support system? Is a pessimist with a support system shown to have less stress than a pessimist who does not? Also, is there a difference between pessimists versus optimists when investigating stress levels? Studies have shown that pessimists and optimists cope with stress differently. Optimism is associated with problem-focused coping where the goal is to remove or go around the problem, and the person believes something can be done to eliminate the problem. Whereas pessimists tend to use emotion-focused coping where they dwell within the problem by trying to reduce the negative emotions the problem revealed such as, anger, embarrassment or frustration (Scheier, Weintraub, Carver 1986). However it remains to be determined how support systems factor into either coping strategies? Specifically, what is the relationship between a person's perception, whether it is optimistic or pessimistic, their support system, and their academic stress? It is clear that academics causes stress in every college student overtime but little is known about the effect of acute stressors (e.g. the day before an exam or presentation)

This study will investigate the relationship between dispositional optimism, having a support system as a coping mechanism and also the effects of stress on college students specifically the day before an exam. The study will also examine if a student's stress level increases the day before an exam compared to any other day. It is proposed that students with dispositional optimism will be less stressed than pessimistic students the day before an exam. Also, students with a support system, regardless of whether he or she is a dispositional optimist or a pessimist, will be less stressed the day before an exam than students without a support system. Participants will also be examined a second time, after their test, to see if their stress level increases the day before an exam compared to any other day.

Adequacy of Design, Feasibility and Likelihood for Success

The sample for this study will consist of 100 undergraduate students (ages 18-25) enrolled in a psychology classes at the university who volunteer or receive extra credit for the study. The students will be asked to complete the following questionnaires the day before an exam. After filling out the informed consent forms, participants will complete the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOR-T) (Scheier, Carver, Bridges 1994), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, Farley 1988), and the SCL-90 which is a test that measures a person's distress (Derogatis, Lipman, Covi 1973). The student's will then take the SCL-90 when they do not have a test on the following day.

Correlational statistics will be performed on the data to see the relationship between the person's level of dispositional optimism or pessimism, if he or she has a support system used as a coping mechanism, and stress the day before and after a test

Potential for Learning

This project allows me to gain knowledge on how to conduct research experiments by developing my own research questions and then performing a psychological experiment. It will also allow me to become more familiar with research procedures that I will implement when conducting future research as an undergraduate student but also as a graduate student. The results of the research on dispositional optimism, support systems and academic stress will allow for understanding of dispositional optimism, what it means to have a support system and how optimism and support systems can affect a person's academic stress. As a researcher, I will become more aware of how personal perceptions can affect stress level as well as, how having a support system contributes to academic stress. By doing this research project I am becoming more familiar with psychological practices, terms and literature as well as the processes that are needed to be performed when conducting research.

Role, Involvement and Activities of Student and Faculty Mentor

With guidance from my faculty mentor I developed a research hypothesis and procedure pertaining to my individual study interests. I developed my own proposal which was then examined and critiqued by my faculty mentor. I also collected the scales that will be used in the research study as well as any background information necessary. I personally, will schedule certain times for students to participate in the study and will then administer the study during the allotted time slots. With assistance from my faculty mentor I will then analyze the data to draw a conclusion from my research.

Appropriateness and Justification of Budget

One goal of the Department of Psychology at Shippensburg University is to provide student researchers opportunities to present their research at local, regional, national, and international conferences. The proposed budget allows me to attend and to present my findings at the Association for Psychological Science conference in Washington, D.C. on May 23-26, 2013.

This research has been approved by the committee on research for human subjects: September 27, 2012; R# 09-10-12-ASB

References

- Burris, J.L., Brechting, E.H., Salsman, J., Carlson, C.L. (2009). Factors Associated with the Psychological Well-Being and Distress of University Students. *Journal of American College Health*, 57(5), 536-543.
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- Ruthig, J.C., Haynes, T.L., Stupnisky, R.H., Perry, R.P. (2009). Perceived Academic Control: mediating the effects of optimism and social support on college students' psychological health. *Soc Psychol Educ*, 12, 233-249.
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- Scheier, M.F., Weintraub, J., Carver, C.S. (1986). Coping with Stress: Divergent Strategies of Optimists and Pessimists. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(6), 1257-1264.
- Zaleski, E.H., Levey-Thors, C., Schiaffino, K.M. (1998). Coping Mechanisms, Stress, Social Support, and Health Problems in College Students. *Applied Developmental Science*, 2(3), 127-137.
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2012-13 UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH GRANT PROGRAM

IPSSP USE

Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania: This worksheet is designed to assist you in preparing your proposal budget. Work with your faculty mentor to identify reasonable costs. Enter your information in the "pink" shaded areas. If you prefer, you may create your own worksheet. If you do so, you are expected to use the same budget categories and to use the same layout as provided on this template. Call IPSSP for questions and/or technical assistance: 717-477-1251.

Project Title:		The relationship between dispositional optimism, support systems, and academic stress on college students		
Lead Student Name:				
Lead Student ID #:				
UGR Grant - Proposed Budget				
		\$/unit	#	\$
Supplies	Item	Example	25	3
Use these lines for consumable supplies and materials you will need for your project. Do not request funding for electronic equipment and/or digital devices already available through the University.	Item 1	description		75
	Item 2	description		
	Item 3	description		
	Item 4	description		
	Item 5	description		
	Item 6	description		
	Item 7	description		
			TOTAL SUPPLIES	
		\$		
Printing/Posters	Item 1	POSTER	45/1	1
	Item 2	description		
	Item 3	description		
			TOTAL PRINTING	
		\$		
Student Travel	Conference registration		1	1
	Air fare			175
	Automobile miles @ 0.555/mile 208mi roundtrip @.555/mile			115
	Tolls			
	Parking			60
	\$177 per day +20% tax for 2			
	Hotel	days		424
	Meals	(maximum = \$25/day; itemized receipts required) 25 x 2days		50
	Other			
			TOTAL STUDENT TRAVEL	869
		\$		
Other	description			
Use for expenses that do not fit categories above.	description			
				TOTAL OTHER
		\$		
Faculty Travel	Conference registration			290
NOTE: The maximum faculty award is \$400.	Air fare			
	Automobile miles @ 0.555/mile			
	Tolls			
	Parking			
	Hotel	177 + 20% per day for 2 days		424
	Meals	(maximum = \$25/day; itemized receipts required)		50
	Other			
			TOTAL FACULTY TRAVEL	764
		\$		
			TOTAL STUDENT REQUEST	869
			TOTAL FACULTY REQUEST (\$400 max)	400