

A Strength-Based Lens on the Ethics of Self-Care in Health-Service Psychology Training

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INTRO

Graduate students in health-service psychology are at an increased risk of unhealthy stress that can negatively impact their academic performance and clinical work. Left untreated, and in many cases unrecognized, the normal stress of graduate school, combined with the stress of working directly with clients, many of whom have experienced significant trauma, can lead to burnout and even secondary post-traumatic stress. This can have a negative impact on students' mental, physical, and behavioral health, which impacts not only their academic work, but their clinical work as well.

METHODS

From a strength-based perspective, we sought to understand the relationship between perceived stress and the positive psychology concepts of well-being, grit, and psychological capital. Our ultimate objective was to identify potential avenues for interventions to help clinical psychology trainees avoid or minimize unhealthy stress and to recognize when it begins to interfere with their academic or clinical work.

We surveyed Master's and Doctoral Students in both APA and CACREP Accredited programs just as the COVID-19 pandemic was taking hold. We asked participants to complete a demographic questionnaire, the Perceived Stress Scale, the PERMA Profiler (to measure well-being), the Grit Scale, and the Psychological Capital Questionnaire.

Well-Being and Psychological Capital vary in a predictable way with Perceived Stress among our sample of counseling and psychology graduate students.

Positive and Negative Emotions, taken together, accounted for 55% of the variance in students' perceived stress.

Findings suggests strength-based approaches focused on positive emotions and resilience may prove useful in both countering unhealthy stress and improving overall well-being among our future counselors and health-service psychologists.

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RESULTS

Results from 104 participants showed that all five pillars of well-being were significantly correlated with perceived stress, as were the added dimensions of negative emotions, and health. All four components of psychological capital, including hope, self efficacy, resilience, and optimism were significantly correlated with perceived stress as well. Interestingly, no relationship was found between grit and perceived stress, suggesting that grit, while likely a necessary component for success in graduate training, may not moderate the perception of stress.

DISCUSSION

Integrating these findings within a strength-based framework might include the research and application of a broaden-and-build strategy to amplify positive emotions as a counter to perceived stress and the development of well-being initiatives geared toward self-care. Incorporating education and training on resilience and self-efficacy may also prove to moderate the negative impact of unhealthy stress.



The Relationship between Well-Being and Perceived Stress (Question 1)

Table 1 demonstrates the relationship between perceived stress and well-being among graduate students. Results indicated a negative association between well-being and perceived stress. All five PERMA pillars, as well as negative emotions and health, were significantly correlated to perceived stress in the expected direction.

Table 1. Correlation of Well-Being Variables on Perceived Stress among Graduate Students

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Perceived Stress	-									
2. Well-Being	-.57**	-								
3. Positive Emotions	-.61**	.91**	-							
4. Negative Emotions	-.69**	-.52**	-.56**	-						
5. Engagement	-.38**	.78**	.63**	-.34**	-					
6. Meaning	-.42**	.86**	.69**	-.37**	.65**	-				
7. Relationships	-.46**	.82**	.78**	-.45**	.45**	.66**	-			
8. Accomplishment	-.42**	.62**	.45**	-.32**	.45**	.55**	.36**	-		
9. Health	-.37**	.37**	.34**	-.31**	.26**	.31**	.32**	.26**	-	
10. Loneliness	.16	.06	-.14	.13	.05	-.07	-.09	.10	-.06	-

** $p < .01$

The Predictive Value of Well-Being on Perceived Stress (Question 2)

Table 2 illustrates the results of our multiple regression that explored the degree to which well-being variables accounted for the variance in perceived stress among graduate students to answer our second research question. The overall model was significant and accounted for 55.4% of the variance in perceived stress ratings. Analyses of the predictor variables revealed that both negative emotions and positive emotions contributed to variance in perceived stress ratings.

Table 2. Linear Regression of Well-Being Variables on Perceived Stress among Graduate Students

Model 1					
Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	21.22	4.69		4.52	.000
Positive Emotions	-1.18	.47	-.33	-2.53	.01
Negative Emotions	1.92	.36	.46	5.32	.000
Engagement	.33	.43	.08	.77	.44
Relationship	.02	.41	.01	.06	.95
Meaning	.34	.47	.09	.72	.48
Accomplishment	-.89	.51	.16	-1.75	.08
Health	-.44	.25	-.13	-1.74	.08
Loneliness	-.19	.17	-.08	-1.13	.26

Note. Results: $F(8, 92) = 14.29, p < .01, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .52.$

Grit and Perceived Stress

Table 4. Correlation of Grit on Perceived Stress among Graduate Students

Variables	1	2
1. Perceived Stress	-	
2. Grit	.04	-

Psychological Capital and Perceived Stress

Table 3. Correlation of Psychological Capital Variables on Perceived Stress among Graduate Students

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived Stress	-				
2. Hope	-.57**	-			
3. Efficacy	-.39**	.62**	-		
4. Resilience	-.56**	.69**	.53**	-	
5. Optimism	-.51**	.69**	.52**	.60**	-

** $p < .01$

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