

# Is the link between stress and mental health now more pertinent than ever?

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Elizabeth C. Braithwaite  
Manchester Metropolitan University (United Kingdom)

Correspondence: e.braithwaite@mmu.ac.uk

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The prevalence of poor mental health, including disorders such as depression and anxiety, has been steadily rising over the past two decades among all age groups, but most strikingly so among children (World Health Organization, 2017). Many factors contribute to the onset and maintenance of poor mental health, including genetics, physiology, neurological functioning, and environmental factors. In short, it is a very complicated picture. One key environmental factor which is consistently associated with poor mental health is perceived psychological stress (Burke et al., 2005; Thoits, 2010). That is, high levels of perceived stress are often associated with high levels of depression and anxiety. Although exactly how feelings of stress lead to the onset of poor mental health is, again, complicated, and includes biological, psychological, and social mechanisms and pathways. Investigation of the link between stress and mental health is a worthy pursuit, because targeting how an individual manages and copes with stress has clear implications for reducing the prevalence of mental health disorders, and their associated personal, social, and economic impacts. Following the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a surge in self-reported low mood, reduced well-being, and poor mental health (Salari et al., 2020); and once again this change is particularly striking among younger people (Salari et al., 2020). Thus, understanding the link between stress and mental health is perhaps more pertinent than ever.

I am delighted to have been invited to be the guest editor for this special issue of *Psychreg Journal of Psychology* (PJP) on stress and mental health. Much of my own research has focused on understanding the biopsychosocial mechanisms that occur following exposure to stress in early life, and how such pathways might manifest in mental health disorders over the life span. As an early career researcher, it has been very exciting to be involved in preparing the manuscripts for this issue, which bring together a range of methodologies and research from several different countries to examine the links between stress and mental health at different stages of the life course.

The first paper in the special issue is a systematic review of associations between social network use, social support, and mental health in adolescence. There have been multiple suggestions, and some supportive evidence (Keles et al., 2020), that the increase in use of social media in adolescents might contribute to the rise in mental health disorders seen in this age group. This systematic review takes a slightly different approach, and questions whether access to social support via social media might buffer against poor mental health. Eleven articles are reviewed, and the findings suggest that adolescents do actively use social media to access social support; and when this social support is perceived, there is a positive impact on mental health. Reade more details on the findings in *Social network use, social support, and mental health in adolescence: A systematic review*.

Continuing on the theme of social support buffering against the effects of perceived stress on poor mental health, the second paper in this issue aimed to investigate whether sub-threshold autistic traits and perceived social support were associated with perceived stress in a general population sample of 322 participants from 32 different countries. In *Non-clinical autistic traits, perceived social support, and perceived stress: A preliminary study in the general population*, the authors report that the autistic traits of rigidity and pragmatic language were associated with perceived stress. Additionally, perceived social support from family was negatively associated with perceived stress, suggesting that support from family members may be particularly important in buffering against perceived stress and its effects.

The next paper, *Social media-induced secondary traumatic stress: Can viewing news relating to knife crime*

*via social media induce PTSD symptoms*, brings us back to the theme of social media and mental health. Building on evidence that engaging with news on the television regarding graphic topics such as terrorism and knife crime can induce secondary traumatic stress symptoms, this study investigated whether similar associations might exist when viewing knife crime on social media. A particularly important point here is that social media algorithms are designed to repeatedly show you similar content to what you have already viewed. Thus, just a single view of a news video regarding knife crime will likely result in exposure to many more videos of a similar nature. The authors report that a higher frequency of viewing knife crime via social media was associated with higher secondary traumatic stress symptoms. Additionally, this effect was moderated by residential location, with those participants living in towns and villages most at risk.

In a very interesting perspective piece, the next article considers whether the costs of national lockdowns aimed at halting the spread of the COVID-19 virus may outweigh the potential benefits, especially in cases where lockdowns have been implemented too late or too lightly (such as in the UK and US), and therefore case and death rates remained very high. This paper considers both the negative impacts of lockdowns on mental health, and also the potential positive outcomes, such as the improvement of stress management strategies which may help individuals to cope with life stressors following the COVID-19 pandemic. You can read more on this topic in *Mental health impacts of lockdown juxtaposed with lockdown effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic: A perspective piece*.

The next article examines the relationship between well-being and prosocial behaviour in young children aged 1–11. Prosocial behaviour is an important construct when considering mental health, especially in children, because those who demonstrate high levels of prosocial behaviour find it easier to make friends, and draw on social support from friendship groups to buffer against the effects of stress. In *Helping, sharing, and comforting behaviours in primary school children: The effect of year group and well-being on prosocial behaviour*, the authors report a developmental trajectory for prosocial behaviours, with those children with more positive well-being demonstrated more positive prosocial behaviours. Thus, the promotion of prosocial behaviours from a young age could be an effective method for combating the effects of stress on mental health.

*Is it all bad news? A transactional model of coping with stress in elite performers* is an interesting article which firstly reviews literature from sport and exercise psychology regarding what constitutes a stressor and how this can affect an individual. Second, a model of coping styles is presented to illustrate how different perceptions of stress and anxiety are managed individually and in groups. This focus on coping with stress in elite performers compliments an existing body of research into stress management and performance in other elite performers; including military, astronauts, and expeditioners. This is an important body of work from which we can draw inferences about stress and performance, and of course its link to mental health, in the general population.

The next article in the issue examines the relationship between personality and suicides, suicide attempts, and suicide ideations using state-level data from the US. Using data from 2008–09, relationships of suicide rates, attempts, plans, and thoughts to the Big Five personality variables and six sociodemographic variables (socioeconomic status, percent of White population, percent of urban population, unemployment rate, religiosity, and depression) were determined using sequential multiple regression analyses. Lower neuroticism and lower agreeableness were associated with higher suicide rates, but were unrelated to attempts, plans, or thoughts. You can read more details on the findings in *Another perspective piece on the relations of personality to suicides, suicide attempts, and suicide ideations*.

The final article in this issue is a review of the film *Swallow*, a psychological thriller released in 2020. The film follows the story of a young woman who, under very stressful circumstances, develops a disorder known as pica; where she swallows increasingly dangerous and non-edible objects, including marbles, batteries, and drawing pins. Although a rare disorder, this has recently been at the forefront of UK media attention when a Lithuanian man was found to have more than one kilogram of mental nails, screws, nuts, and knives in his stomach (BBC, 2021). It is important to consider and review how mental health disorders, such as pica, are portrayed in the media; since such portrayals are often the source of misunderstandings and stigma within the general public.

In sum, this special issue brings together several perspectives on the link between stress and mental health across differing age groups, cultures, and contexts, I hope that you enjoy reading these nine very different articles. I have certainly enjoyed guest editing this issue.

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