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Improving Stress Management for Female College Students

Kelsey Acosta

A Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family  
Science

### **Introduction**

Some female college students may struggle with stress management. Female students often cope with unique stressors that male students would not typically face, such as meeting societal expectations of upholding levels of emotional labor and managing relational influences. Poor stress management skills can lead to decreased academic performance and anxiety. Providing female college students with the knowledge of how to effectively manage stressors that are unique to their demographic can help improve their time management skills, help avoid the feeling of being overwhelmed, and create a more enjoyable college experience. I will hold a one-hour workshop for female college students at CSUMB to provide tips and strategies to stress management.

### **Needs Statement**

Many college students report feeling stress in college, but women in college may have unique experiences with stress. Suppose stress levels in female college students are not addressed. In that case, their mental health and academic performance may also decline, their sleep patterns may become disturbed, and their interpersonal relationships may be affected. Therefore, many college women would benefit from education on improving their stress management.

Research has supported that women are more susceptible to feeling higher stress levels than men due to different stress-coping mechanisms (Brougham et al., 2009). Women can cope with differing levels of stress in various ways, often seeking the support of their friends, family, and partners to help provide emotional and mental relief. However, research has shown that stressors such as maintaining social relationships

and emotional labor contributed to a higher level of perceived stress (Brougham et al., 2009). Some women may not be informed of managing their stress and resort to ineffective or even harmful stress relief techniques. Brougham et al. state that female college students reported engaging in higher self-punishment strategies when dealing with stress. These self-punishment strategies consisted of negative intrapersonal self-image and self-blame for feelings of lack of accomplishment or academic success.

Stressful life occurrences and events frequently can affect restful sleep. Lee et al. (2013) stated that female college students who reported having less than 7 hours of sleep a night were more susceptible to higher levels of fatigue severity (Lee et al. 2013). Students who perceive their stress levels to be increased can have their nightly sleep schedule severely impacted, contributing to daytime fatigue. (Lee et al., 2013). Students who do not obtain a minimum of seven hours of sleep a night are at higher risk of being unable to perform throughout their day efficiently mentally. The lack of sleep caused by a student's perception of stress can affect their mental ability to perform in academics positively.

Female college students spend more time, on average, maintaining their interpersonal relationships than men (Darling et al., 2007). Stress from maintaining these relationships can contribute to students' existing academic stressors in college. Societal expectations tend to hold women in higher regard when considering emotional labor in their relationships (Darling et al., 2007). This emotional labor can contribute to the perception of higher levels of stress since women tend to consider their interpersonal relationships when making decisions that might impact others, leading

them to feel stressed as women perceive their relationships as part of their identity (Torres, Garcia 2019).

Recognizing the specific and unique stressors that women college students face can allow them the opportunity to help identify and better manage their stress. Since women have unique experiences with what they perceive are stressors, such as interpersonal relationships, and maintaining those relationships, I have created a one-hour workshop on stress management information and techniques for female college students attending a CSU.

### **Theory**

Gender Schema Theory (GST) can be applicable to a female's perception of stress. In her theory, Bem (1988) explained the relationship between gender and society and how biological characteristics can influence a society's perception of stress. According to GST, due to societal expectations of women holding a higher degree of emotional labor, women develop and perceive their stress differently than men. Hoffman and Pasley (1998) state that men and women have different belief systems containing gender stereotypes. These societal stereotypes expect women to maintain the majority of emotional labor in interpersonal relationships. The toll of this societal expectation can contribute to added stress and become a unique stressor that only women experience. Complementary to Gender Schema Theory, Gilligan, in her theory, suggested that women develop and form morals and values around their relationships and often consider their interpersonal relationships when making moral decisions. Gilligan's theory can explain how women perceive their relationships as an essential part of their identities and everyday lives. Gilligan also stated that there is a strong correlation

between ethics and responsibility, leading women to feel added pressure to ensure that their relational counterparts do not get harmed in the process of decision-making.

Making moral decisions based on consideration for their relationships can contribute to female college students' unique set of stressors.

### **Consideration of Diversity**

My project will be conducted via a live Zoom session with female college students enrolled in a CSU. The participants have all attended college or universities for different lengths of time and are majoring in various areas, working towards obtaining an undergraduate degree. The Fall 2020 enrollment demographic in the CSU system reported that more than half, 57.5%, of students enrolled in a California State University were female. 74% of students attending a CSU were between 18-24, and 14.2% were aged 25-29 years old. Additionally, 44.7% of CSU students were of Latinx descent, 22% were White, 4% were African American, .02% American Indian and 15.8% were Asian/Pacific Islander. Participants completed a google survey prior to attending the presentation that collected information such as age, name of college/university, ethnicity, race, their major, and duration of time enrolled in college. As a result of having an exclusively female audience, males will not be considered as part of the intended audience. For males to be included my presentation would take a different approach and move away from the emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Men, according to Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, demonstrate thinking and decision making on a more individual level that is guided by personal principles. This project is catered towards female adults and this information is not likely to be applicable towards younger

adolescents or children who may experience different levels of perceived stress as well as different interpersonal relationship stressors. Additionally, this project does not address the unique issues and stressors that transgender females, or non-binary individuals may face in regard to stress management for cisgender, female college students.

### **Learning Outcomes**

By the end of the presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Identify at least three ways stress affects the body.
2. Identify two triggers of stress
3. Indicate at least two stress management techniques that the participant intends to use to help relieve stress.

### **Method**

Before the beginning of the presentation, the participants will complete a google survey that will require them to provide information about themselves as well as information regarding their schooling. My Presentation will be held Via Zoom, I will thank the participants for attending my presentation. See Appendix A for the presentation. I will briefly explain to them what the purpose of the presentation is as well as what the presentation will be about. I will begin the session by asking what the participants feel are stressors in their life as women. They will have an open discussion about what the participants feel are stressors in their lives in relation to being women as well as college students. I will lightly facilitate this conversation while the audience each discuss their stressors for about 10 minutes. The attendees will be able to discuss in one group and will work to discuss if there are any commonalities in the stressors that they each face.

After the discussion about what the audience states what they feel their stressors are, I will share a short lighthearted video on how women feel about their stress <https://youtu.be/8JfJhJWxB9Q>. After we watch the video, I will allow participants to make comments or ask questions if they please and will explain how this video is relative to the content of the presentation for about five minutes. I will discuss ways in which the stressors that women face differ from those of men and how society can influence a woman's stressors. Then I will inform the audience that we will do a short exercise for five minutes where they will discuss and write down how stress makes them feel. This will allow participants more insight on the physical symptoms of stress. Afterwards, I will discuss ways in which stress can physically affect the body as well as the different ways in which stress can be triggered.

After discussing the ways in which stress affects women differently than men as well as how stress impacts the body I will begin to provide examples and methods in which the participants can manage their stress. I will provide four different strategies for stress management ranging from breathing exercises to physical exercises. Afterwards I will lead a discussion in which ways the audience will discuss ways in which stress relief methods resonated with them as well as which existing strategies they use when they begin to feel stressed. I will ask if there are any questions or comments and thank them for their attendance. After the presentation, the audience will individually complete a google survey that will evaluate their understanding of the learning outcomes.

## **Results**



Learning outcome one was for the participants to be able to identify three different ways in which stress can affect the body. I believe that this learning outcome was partially met as the participants were unable to correctly identify physical, emotional, and mental ways that stress affects the body. Although the participants were able to identify ways in which stress feels and affects their body during activity one, which allowed participants to engage in a discussion about their stressors, in the seminar, the post seminar quiz indicated that the participants were unable to differentiate each effect of stress. See Figure 1 for what the participants indicated how stress feels. Out of the four participants that completed the post-workshop questionnaire, three participants were able to accurately identify the physical and emotional ways stress can affect the body whereas only two out of four were able to identify the mental effect of stress on the body. See Tables 1, 2 and 3.

Learning outcome two was for the participants to be able to identify at least two different triggers of stress. I believe that this was also partially met as all four participants who completed the questionnaire were able to identify at least one trigger of stress, with that trigger being identified as finances. Three out of the four participants that completed the questionnaire were able to identify a second trigger of stress, being work. Although work as a trigger of stress was not directly presented in the workshop, it was discussed in activity 2 when participants wrote down some of their common stressors and all verbally agreed that work can, and often triggers their stress. See Figure 2 for what the participants stated triggered their stress.

The third learning outcome was for participants to be able to indicate two stress management techniques that they intend to use to alleviate stress. This learning

outcome was mostly met according to the post-workshop questionnaire. One participant was able to indicate two stress management techniques, being the box breathing method as well as discussing their stress with family and friends for emotional support. Although two out of four participants were able to indicate at least one stress management technique, they were unable to accurately identify two techniques. Participant 3 was unable to attend the entirety of the workshop due to school obligations, which may have contributed to not being able to accurately identify two stress management techniques and being unable to meet this learning outcome.

### **Discussion**

I believe that my project was partially successful. Although the participants met most of the learning outcomes, participants struggled to differentiate between what can trigger or initiate stress and something that causes them to become stressed such as relationships. Participants were also unable to recall the stress relief methods I presented. Although the participants did not seem to understand these ideas fully, they could engage in conversation and openly discuss the stressors that they face with one another. I would have liked the discussion to focus more on the unique stressors they face as women instead of the general stressors they face being college students. Perhaps, if I had gone more in-depth and explained how and why women perceive stress differently than men, their discussions would have included these aspects of the presentation.

I believe that using Gilligan's theory was the most appropriate theory for my presentation topic. When the participants discussed what stressors they face, they stated that family obligations and their interpersonal relationships with friends, partners

and even coworkers contributed to their stress. This is congruent with Gilligan's theory because Gilligan states that women tend to consider the implications of their actions when making decisions that affect others. The participants resembled this theory when they noted that they consider their relationships with others as something that affects their emotional and mental wellbeing, leading them to feel stressed. When considering diversity in my presentation, I did not include the unique stressors that transgender women may face. I presented information based on a theory that concentrated only on ciswomen, which did not allow me to explore further or address the stressors of the LGBTQI community. I also assumed that my participants were young, single women who were not married and did not have children. Married women with children may face additional challenges and stressors being college students that, in turn, were not addressed in my presentation.

Reflecting on my presentation, there would be a couple of things I believe that I would have done differently. One was taking more time to thoroughly explain the correlation between the theory I chose and the rest of the information I included in my presentation. I would have also liked the opportunity to present to a larger audience. It would have helped gather a more accurate representation of what women think stresses them out as college students. My presentation over Zoom made it convenient to get participants who are currently enrolled in other universities aside from CSUMB. However, I feel that giving a presentation in person would have allowed me to reach out to fellow students who attend CSUMB and would have contributed to gathering a larger audience for my presentation.

Overall, I believe that my project was successful and hope that the participants were able to gain more knowledge about how to best manage their stress. I enjoyed listening to the discussion the participants had amongst themselves and was glad that the audience was engaged in the presentation. After the presentation I received positive feedback from a couple of the participants saying that they enjoyed the activities and the stress relief methods that were provided. I enjoyed presenting my topic and feel that not only did the participants learn about stress management, but as did I!

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Identify 2 triggers of stress	Trigger	Incorrect answers
Participant 1	Work, Relationships	Relationships
Participant 2	Saving money, cleaning	Cleaning
Participant 3	Work, Finances	N/A/
Participant 4	Money, Trying to stay on top of daily tasks	N/A
Participant 5	Money, Anxiety	Anxiety

Table 2

Identify 2 triggers of stress	Trigger	Incorrect answers
Participant 1	Work, Relationships	Relationships
Participant 2	Saving money, cleaning	Cleaning
Participant 3	Work, Finances	N/A/
Participant 4	Money, Trying to stay on top of daily tasks	N/A
Participant 5	Money, Anxiety	Anxiety

Table 3

Participants	Indicated Stress Management Technique	incorrect answer
Participant 1	Listen to music, and take time to relax/unwind	Listen to music, take time to relax
Participant 2	Box breathing, lighting candles	Lighting candles
Participant 3	Take time more time for myself, be ok with setting aside tasks for the next day	Take time to self, set aside tasks
Participant 4	Writing in a journal, lighting candles	Lighting candles
Participant 5	Talking with family/friends, using the box method to relax	N/A

Figure 1

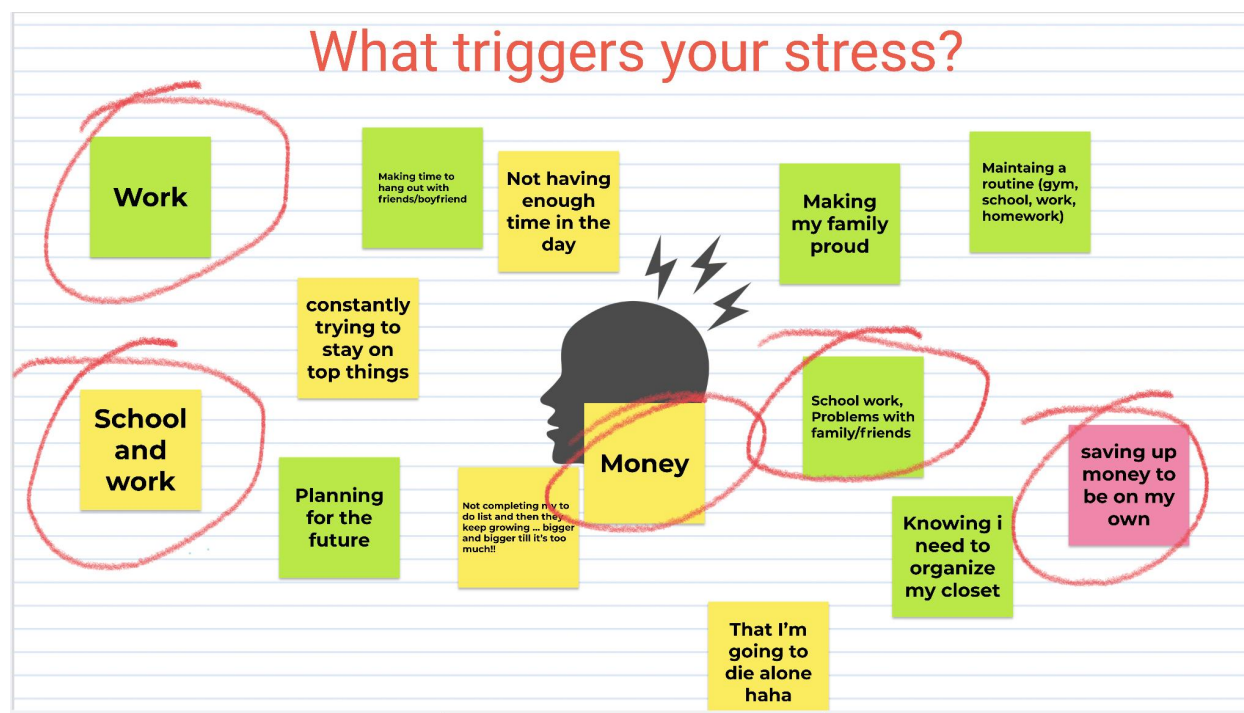


Figure 2



Appendix A

# Improving Stress Management for Female College Students


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## Appendix B

## Needs Statement

- Female college students may have unique experiences with stress
- Acknowledge differences & help manage stress
- Mental health & College experience




## Appendix C

## Theory

Gilligan's Theory states that women have a different psychological perspective than men.

- Influenced by societal expectations
- leads women to consider their relationships when making moral decisions



## Appendix D

## Method

- 1-hour workshop addressing stress management for female college students
- Remote via Zoom
- Friends attending CSU



Appendix E

## Method

### Step 1

Participants completed a pre-workshop questionnaire that evaluated their knowledge about stress and stress management.

### Step 2

After an introduction to what the workshop will entail, participants discussed common stressors that they face as women in college

### Step 3

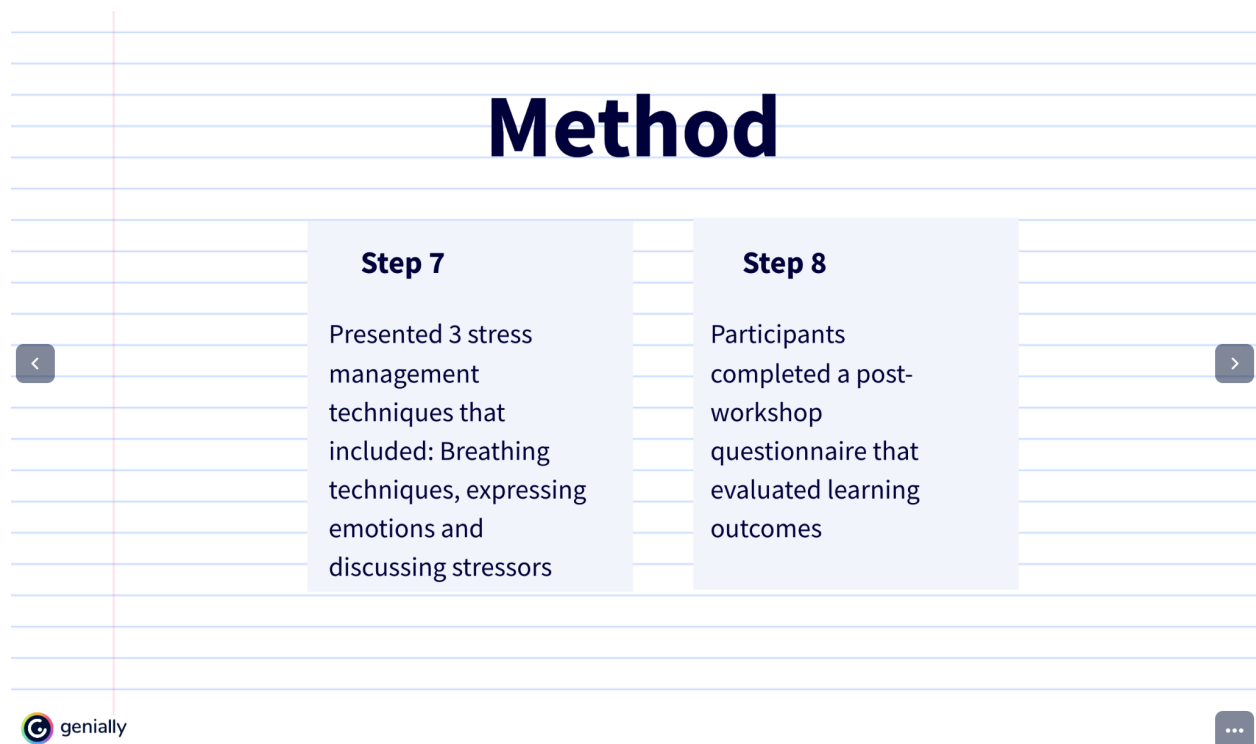
I discussed how the stressors the participants indicated can be perceived differently being a woman, than how a man may perceive them



Appendix F



Appendix G



Appendix H

# Results



Appendix I

## Learning Outcome 1

LO1: Identify 3 ways stress affects the body

	% correct	Incorrect answers	Correct answer
What is one way stress physically affects the body?	80	Social isolation	Upset Stomach - 4/5
What is one way stress can emotionally affect the body?	60	Boredom, decreased intimacy in relationships	Anxiety - 3/5
What is one way stress mentally affects the body?	60	headaches	Indecisiveness -3/5

**LO1: Partially met**



Appendix J

## Learning Outcome 2

LO2: Identify 2 triggers of stress

Identify 2 triggers of stress	Trigger	Incorrect answers	Correct answer
*Participant 1	Work, Relationships	Relationships	Work
Participant 2	Saving money, cleaning	Cleaning	Saving money
*Participant 3	Work, Finances	N/A	Work, Finances
Participant 4	Money, Trying to stay on top of daily tasks	Trying to stay on top of daily tasks	Money
Participant 5	Money, Anxiety	Anxiety	Money

**LO2: Partially met**



Appendix K

## Learning Outcome 3

LO3: Indicate two stress management techniques

Participants	Indicated Stress Management Technique	Incorrect answer	Correct answer
*Participant 1	Listen to music, and take time to relax/unwind	Listen to music, take time to relax	N/A
Participant 2	Box breathing, lighting candles	Lighting candles	Box breathing
*Participant 3	Take time more time for myself, be ok with setting aside tasks for the next day	Take time to self, set aside tasks	N/A
Participant 4	Writing in a journal, lighting candles	Lighting candles	Writing in a journal
Participant 5	Talking with family/friends, using the box method to relax	N/A	Talking with family, Box breathing

**LO3: Partially met**



Appendix L

## Discussion

- More time elaborating on connection between theory and content
- Participants engaged in conversation & activities
- Did not address LGBTQI stressors
- Complications presenting via Zoom
- Successful



Appendix M

# Thank You!

# Questions?

