



Examining Social Anxiety Among Adolescents in Accordance with Coping with Stress Approaches

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to find out whether there is a significant correlation between university students' social anxiety and their coping with stress styles, and whether coping with stress styles predict social anxiety at a significant level. The findings of the study show that there are significant negative correlations between self confident and optimistic approaches to coping with stress and social anxiety and its sub-scales of social avoidance/shyness, low self appraisal and expectancy of criticism by others and that there are positive correlations between social anxiety and following helpless, submissive approaches and receiving social support. It has also been observed that different styles of coping with stress explain social avoidance, expectancy of criticism by others and lack of self-value subscales of social anxiety.

Keywords

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Introduction

Social anxiety is a common psychotic disorder (Romm, Rossberg, Berg, Hansen, Andreassen & Melle, 2011) and many people experience a certain level of anxiety in various social circumstances (Sanders, 2003). In DSM-V social anxiety is defined as a condition in which an individual has "an evident and constant fear of circumstances where they meet new people and may feel to be under the gaze of others, and when they take part in one or more social activity they fear that they will behave in a way that would humiliate or embarrass themselves." (APA, DSM-V, 2013).

Social anxiety disorder (social phobia) is a widespread and limiting problem described as intense fear, emotional distress and persistent anxiety of social situations involving social interaction and assessment. This anxiety often leads to avoidance of social situations, or tolerance to these situations with an extreme stress (Nicholls, Staiger, Williams, Richardson & Kambouropoulos, 2014). Social anxiety results from the existence or the possibility of interpersonal judgements in an "imagined" or "real" social environment. Social anxiety occurs because of the desire to create a positive social impression on other people, and fear of failing to achieve this. Highly socially anxious individuals significantly tend to evaluate their social performance abilities and other outstanding social self-attributes negatively, and perceive other people's evaluation of themselves negatively (Moscovitch & Hofmann, 2007; Orr & Moscovitch, 2010; Moscovitch, Orr, Rowa, Gehring Reimer, & Antony, 2009; Sanders, 2003).

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Under social threat, highly socially anxious individuals direct attentional resources toward observing their internal anxiety symptoms and other perceived negative features of the self. This results in the occurrence of natural, constant, disturbing and generally negative cognitive sense of self. These perceptions tend to be negatively damaged and exaggerated representations of the self; nevertheless, they are perceived and committed by socially anxious individuals as accurate. Thus, these perceptions take important emotional and cognitive resources and possibly prevent the encoding of salient positive social and interpersonal cues in the external environment (Moscovitch & Huyder, 2011). The fear of being negatively evaluated by others lies in the centre of understanding social anxiety (Sanders, 2003; Beidel, Morris & Turner, 2004; Carleton, Collimore and Asmundson, 2007; Eren-Gümüş, 2006; Nicholls et al., 2014).

Individuals with social anxiety are characterised with lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem and expectation to be rejected in a social situation (Moscovitch, Orr, Rowa, Reimer & Antony, 2009; Levinson, et al., 2015). However when they are by themselves or do not perceive any threat, they tend to evaluate themselves more positively (Eren-Gümüş, 2006). The most evident behavioural sign of social anxiety is to “avoid” social situations (Kashdan, 2002). On the contrary, when high socially anxious individuals are rejected, they are more prone to avoid new social interactions that can source positive experiences (Hirsch & Mathews, 2000). After being rejected, high socially anxious individuals expect new interactions to be lack of positive emotions and friendly behaviour; in turn, these individuals behave more negatively toward others (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister & Schaller, 2007). Therefore, when high socially anxious individuals experience rejection (their most feared outcome), they display an absence of positive cognitions and behaviours in new social contexts (Kashdan, Weeks & Savostyanova, 2011).

Studies show that, compared to social anxiety free individuals, individuals with social phobia have fewer friends (Beidel, Rao, Scharfstein, Wong, Alfano, 2010), find it difficult to have close relations with the same or opposite sex (Alden & Taylor, 2004) and have less social support and experience breakdowns in their social functions (Eng, Coles, Heimberg & Safren, 2005) have lower academic achievement levels (Eng et al., 2005), participate less in social activities, and consider professions requiring less social interactions during career choice (Beidel et al., 2010). The results of these studies also indicate that individuals with social anxiety face many stressful situations in their daily lives and have difficulty in coping with these difficulties. If an experience is a source of stress for the individual, and has a quality that would drive him/her to readapt, question their habitual living and problem solving patterns and/or change these patterns, then the individual will make an effort to relax, adapt and overcome the challenge. In this respect, stress and ways of coping gain importance (Basut, 2006).

Although major negative events and daily problems may develop independently in a person's life, they are often randomly related. A person who applies the problem-solving coping strategy effectively (1) perceives a stressful life event as a challenge or “problem to be solved,” (2) believes that he or she is capable of solving the problem successfully, (3) carefully defines the problem and sets a realistic goal, (4) generates a variety of alternative “solutions” or coping options, (5) chooses the “best” or most effective solution, (6) implements the solution effectively, and (7) carefully observes and evaluates the outcomes (Dobson, 2010).

In Lazarus's model, “stress” is defined as a person-environment relationship in which demands are appraised by the person to tax or exceed coping resources and threaten his or her wellbeing. “Stressful life events” are life experiences that present a person with demands for personal, social, or biological readjustment. Two major types of stressful life events are major negative events and daily problems. A “major negative event” is a broad life experience, such as a major negative life change, that often requires cleaning readjustments in a person's life (e.g., divorce). In contrast, a “daily problem” is a more narrow and specific stressful life event (Dobson, 2010).

Even not equally efficient, coping strategies are utilized to reduce the stress levels. According to Lazarus and Folkman, being in social interactions reduces mental stress and increase happiness for individuals. On the other hand, insisting on ineffective coping strategies may cause mental stress that triggers illness (Hirokawa, Yagi & Miyata, 2002). If coping with stress process is successful, the stress can be contained; if it is unsuccessful, this will lead to various psychological and physiological reactions set in motion by stress (Lazarus, 2006). Coping strategies are mechanisms through which stress can be managed and learning new coping strategies can make an individual develop new skills to manage and reduce the level of stress. Under stressful conditions, coping strategies not only involve managing stress, but they also consist of managing the negative emotional reactions that occur due to the consequences of stress (Rabbani, Mansor, Yaacob & Talib, 2014).

Coping with stress can be (a) problem-focused coping and (b) emotion-focused coping. In problem-focused coping the individual is actively involved by using logical analysis that leads to information and planned action that aim to eliminate the stress causing circumstance. Problem-focused coping is utilized to contain the problematic relation between persons and their circumstances by means of problem solving, decision making and/or action taking; in this way the individual aims to cope with problems that cause stress. In emotion-focused coping, the change in the relationship between the person and their environment takes place not as a result of direct behaviour but as a result of how the person appraises their environment. Self control, seeking social support, withdrawal, avoidance, accountability, positive appraisals are among emotion-focused coping efforts. In emotion-focused coping, an individual tries to control his/her emotional response to a stressful situation; for instance, he/she redefines the situation by focusing on its positive aspects. In problem-focused coping, an individual tries to deal with the problem causing the stressful situation. People using problem focused coping strategies adapt better to stressful situations than people using passive, emotion-focused coping strategies. People tend to use emotional-focused coping when they believe that they can do little to change the stressful situation and problem-focused coping when they believe their resources or the demands of the situation are changeable (Völlink, Bolman, Eppingbroek & Dehue, 2013). When relatively uncontrollable stressors are encountered, attempting to change the situation may be futile. The use of emotion-focused coping enables people to change the only thing they can control in this context: their emotions (Troy, Shallcross & Mauss, 2013).

In this context, the purpose of the present study is to establish whether there is a meaningful correlation between social anxiety displayed by university students (social avoidance/shyness, low self appraisal, and being criticised) and their ways of coping with stress (self-confident, optimistic approach, receiving social support, or helpless and submissive approach).

Method

Participants

The present research adopted survey model. The sample of the present research consisted of 265 female, 243 male; a total of 508 adolescents at the age of 16-22 ($M=19$) who were selected through random cluster sampling method among 3rd and 4th grade high school students who study at Centres for Vocational Training; and freshmen university students.

Instruments

Coping With Stress Styles Scale:

Coping With Stress Styles Scale (CWSSC): It is a scale developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The original scale, which consisted of 66 items, was revised by Sahin and Durak (1995) for university students and turned into a format with 30 items. The scale has five subscales: "Self confident" approach, "Optimistic" approach and "Seeking Social Support" - these are considered to be "Effective Methods" in terms of coping with stress- whereas "Helpless" and "Submissive" approaches are viewed to be "Ineffective Methods" in terms of coping with stress (Sahin and Durak 1995). The present study found that reliability coefficients for the subscales ranged between $\alpha=.45$ and $.80$. Sahin, Guler and Basim (2009) found the reliability coefficients for the scale to ranged between $\alpha=.63$ and $.83$.

Social Anxiety Scale: This scale was developed by Palanci and Ozbay (2001) to determine "social anxiety" related problems experienced by university students. The scale was developed in a way, which is applicable to university student population and to measure their skills in social circumstances and their experience of stress in such circumstances. Following a factor analysis of structural validity, a test has been developed with three factors, which include 30 items. These are (1) social avoidance, (2) expectancy of criticism (expectancy of criticism) and (3) lack of self worth. The total variance explained by three factors is %32.9. In the analyses carried out to test the validity of the criteria, it has been observed that there are positive linear relationships between Social Anxiety Scale, and with MMPI SI sub test ($r=.43$, $p<.001$), SCL sub tests and interpersonal relational sensitivity sub test ($r=.51$, $p<.001$), anxiety test ($r=.25$, $p<.01$), phobic anxiety sub test ($r=.36$, $p<.001$), depression sub test ($r=.40$, $p<.001$), and that these levels are in line with the theoretical explanation. Cronbach Alpha value, which is calculated by internal consistency test method for reliability calculations, is $.89$. This is a likert type five-point scale test with a range of 0-4. The higher scores indicate an increase in social anxiety levels (Palanci & Özbay, 2001).

Data Analysis

In order to determine the relationship between social anxiety and coping with stress 'Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Technique' was used. Furthermore, to determine the power of coping stress scores of students in explaining worthlessness subscale scores of social anxiety scale, multiple Regression Analyses (Enter) was performed.

Findings

This part of the study includes the data regarding the relationship between coping with stress styles and social anxiety and the data regarding how coping with stress styles determine social anxiety.

Table 1. The Relationship Between Coping with Stress Styles and Social Avoidance, Expectancy of Criticism and Lack of Self Worth

	Social Avoidance	Expectancy of criticism	Lack of Self Worth
Self Confident Approach (SCA)	-.386**	-.200**	-.313**
Optimistic Approach (OA)	-.243**	-.120**	-.204**
Helpless Approach (HA)	.386**	.402**	.388**
Submissive Approach (SA)	.247**	.246**	.328**
Seeking Social Support Approach (SSA)	.167**	.136**	.108*

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 1 shows that there is a negative correlation between coping with stress styles of self confident and optimistic approach, and social avoidance, expectancy of criticism and lack of self worth, and that there is a positive correlation between the styles of helpless, submissive and seeking social support approaches and social avoidance, expectancy of criticism and lack of self worth.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Social Anxiety From Coping With Stress Styles

Dependant Variables	R	R ²	ΔR^2	Predicted variables	B	Std. Error	β	t
Social Avoidance	.49	.24	.23	SCA	-.827	.136	-.349*	-6.074*
				OA	.279	.175	.088	1.593
				HA	.557	.100	.261*	5.563*
				SA	.028	.131	.010	.211
				SSA	.676	.204	.132*	3.319*
Expectancy of Criticism	.42	.18	.17	SCA	-.204	.111	-.109	-1.831
				OA	.209	.143	.084	1.461
				SA	.599	.082	.355	7.309*
				SA	.118	.107	.052	1.099
				SSA	.305	.167	.076	1.832
Lack of Self Worth	.45	.20	.20	SCA	-.261	.080	-.191*	-3.254*
				OA	.054	.103	.030	.521
				HA	.309	.059	.251*	5.248*
				SA	.245	.077	.150*	3.189*
				SSA	.163	.120	.055	1.364

* $p < .01$

SCA: Self Confident Approach, OA: Optimistic Approach, Approaches, HA: Helpless Approach, SSA: Seeking Social Support and SA: Submissive Approaches

Coping with stress styles of university students significantly predict social avoidance ($R = .49$, $R^2 = .24$, $F = 31.363$, $p < .001$), expectancy of criticism ($R = .42$, $R^2 = .18$, $F = 21.734$, $p < .001$) and lack of self worth ($R = .45$, $R^2 = .20$, $F = 25.799$, $p < .001$) sub-scales. Table 2 shows that self confident approach ($\beta = -.349$, $p < .001$), helpless approach ($\beta = .261$, $p < .001$) and seeking social support ($\beta = .132$, $p < .001$) are significant indicators of social avoidance. Coping with stress styles explain 19% of the variance of expectancy of criticism. The study has found that helpless approach is a significant predictor in Expectancy of Criticism ($\beta = .355$, $p < .001$). Coping with stress styles explain the 21% of the variance of lack of self-worth sub-scale of social anxiety. The significant predictors for the lack of self worth subscale are helpless approach ($\beta = .251$, $p < .01$), self confident approach ($\beta = -.191$, $p < .01$) and submissive approach ($\beta = .150$, $p < .01$).

Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

The present study examined whether coping with stress styles is a significant predictor for subscales of social anxiety: social avoidance, expectancy of criticism and lack of self worth. The main hypothesis of the study is that the individuals who use effective styles for coping with stress would have lower social anxiety and that those who use ineffective coping styles would have higher social anxiety levels. The findings of the study confirm the hypothesis in terms of ineffective styles for coping with stress, and partially confirm it in terms of effective styles for coping with stress (It has been observed, as anticipated, that there is a positive correlation between social anxiety and effective coping styles of self confident approach and optimistic approach whereas the correlation between seeking social support approach and social anxiety is a negative one.) In addition, regression analysis results point that some of the coping with stress styles are useful in predicting social avoidance, expectancy of criticism and lack of self worth.

The findings of the present research are in agreement with the findings of other researches (Findlay, Coplan & Bowker, 2009; Burgess, Wojslawowicz, Rubin, Krasnor & La Force, 2006; Baltacı & Hamarta, 2013) which study the relationships between coping with stress and social anxiety in that the individuals who suffer from social anxiety tend to use emotion focused, in other words, maladaptive strategies to cope with stress (such as social avoidance). It has been observed that the university students (undergraduates) who can effectively cope with stress more often use self confident and optimistic approaches whereas those who cannot cope more often use emotion focused strategies of submissive and helpless approaches (Razi, Kuzu, Yıldız & Arifoglu, 2009). The findings that individuals with social phobia have lower problem solving skills (Palanci, 2004; Hamarta, Baltacı, Üre & Demirbaş, 2010) are also in agreement the findings of our study. The use of effective coping methods helps the individuals to protect themselves against stress and self-confidence works as a significant buffer against stress too. Coping with stress is also related to positive emotions and alleviation of distress (Korkut, 2004). When the individuals see their problem solving skills as efficient, their resilience would increase and this would help them overcome their problems (Palanci, 2004).

It has been observed that coping with stress styles, which predict the social avoidance aspect of social anxiety respectively are self-confidence, helpless approach and seeking social support. Self-confident individuals are people who display an active approach, take a positive attitude towards stressful situations and believe in their capabilities to change the stressful circumstances that they find themselves in. Studies report that individuals who have effective problem solving skills take a more positive approach when dealing with problems, see the problems as challenges that can be resolved, and have high self confidence and self esteem (Avsaroglu & Üre, 2007; D'Zurilla, Chang & Sanna, 2003, Hamarta, 2009). Low self-esteem is considered an associate feature of social anxiety (APA, 2013). Individuals with social anxiety have low self-esteem. Low self-esteem increases fears of negative evaluation and social anxiety. Hence, a person who evaluates the self in a negative way is prone to believing that others are of the same opinion, and this anticipation of negative evaluation may result in anxiety in social situations. Individuals with low self-esteem are at significant risk of developing clinical social anxiety. Higher self-esteem would significantly predict lower social anxiety (Rasmussen & Pidgeon, 2011). An individual who displays a helpless approach, in contrast to self-confident approach, would withdraw in the face of a stressful event and wait for the event to disappear by itself. It has also been observed that there is a positive correlation between seeking social support and social avoidance. This finding suggests that individuals who avoid social circumstances feel more confident in such circumstances when they receive support from their immediate environment.

The expectancy of criticism refers to the discomfort that individuals feel towards others who criticise them or the lack of confidence that those individuals feel when faced with such an attitude. The reason why helpless approach as a coping style is the only predictor for the fear of being criticised may result from the possibility that individuals who adopt this approach are the ones who are hesitant to express their negative reactions towards others. This is probably because the ability to respond to criticism may involve the individuals' having adequate social skills and the risk to get into

an argument with others (Deniz, Hamarta & Ari, 2005). Some investigators suggest that poor social skill or inadequate social behaviors are a right outcome of social anxiety and excessive self-focused attention during social interactions. People with social phobia possess adequate social skills but their anxiety prevents their ability to focus on social interactions and use skills appropriately (Beidel, Rao, Scharfstein, Wong and Alfano, 2010).

When lack of self worth is considered as a negative evaluation of self perception, the reaction that an individual displays in stressful circumstances manifests itself either as avoidance or submissiveness. Social anxiety involves fear and avoidance of social contexts that carry the potential for judgement or rejection by others. Individuals with social anxiety are always described as shy, behaviorally inhibited, and reluctant to take risks. (Richards, Patel, Dainele-Zegarelli, et al., 2015). Likewise, the findings of the study support this hypothesis of ours. Submissive and helpless approaches are the coping styles which involve waiting helplessly and accepting proposed solutions instead of tackling the problem.

Further research studying the relationship between social-anxiety and coping with stress from different dimensions on different samples would be useful to clarify the subject. Additionally, more research is needed on psycho-social intervention programs on social-anxiety and coping with stress. Psycho-social based researches presenting the importance of coping with stress in treatment and prevention of social-anxiety can be important.

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