Does Procrastination Explain the Link between Stress and Worse Mental Health?

Dakota Smith, Psychology Major
Faculty Mentor: Patricia L. Tomich, Psychological Sciences

Abstract

Previous research has indicated that more stress that is associated with experiencing challenging life events is related to worse mental health. The purpose of this research was to examine whether individuals' procrastination (i.e., inability to meet deadlines) mediates the link between more stress and worse global mental health. Participants were 332 undergraduates (mean age = 22.02, SD = 6.15; 77.1% female; 91.6% White) who completed online surveys. Stressful life events were assessed using the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967); procrastination was assessed using the Active Procrastination Scale (Choi & Moran, 2009); and global mental health was assessed using a modified version of the SF-12 (Ware, Kosinski, & Keller, 1996). Preliminary analyses indicated that older participants reported less procrastination \((r = -0.13, p = .021)\) and males reported better mental health \((M = 3.65)\) than did females \((M = 3.34)\), \(t(330) = 3.21, p < .001\). Therefore, primary analyses controlled for age and gender. Mediation analyses revealed that there was a significant indirect effect of more stress on worse mental health via more procrastination, \(ab = -0.07\), BCa CI [-0.12, -0.04]. Thus, more procrastination appeared to function as a partial mediator explaining the association between experiencing more stress due to challenging life events and worse mental health. Overall, this research suggests that clinicians could focus on striving to reduce tendencies to procrastinate when individuals are adjusting to stressful life events, which in turn may strengthen their global mental health.

Background

Previous Research on Procrastination

Passive procrastination
- Postponing tasks because individuals are unable to make decisions to act in a timely manner
- Leads to poor outcomes
Active procrastination
- Intentionally postponing tasks as a time management strategy, using motivation from time pressure to meet deadlines
- Leads to satisfactory outcomes
(Choi & Moran, 2009)

Participants and Procedures

Participants
- \(N = 332\)
- Mean age: 22.02, \(SD = 6.15\)
- 77.1% Female
- 91.6% White

Procedures
- Participants were recruited into the Everyday Life Study via the Regional Campus subject pool
- All completed online surveys

Instruments

Procrastination
- Active Procrastination Scale (Choi & Moran, 2009)
- Scale: Ability to Meet Deadlines
  - 4 items: e.g., “Please indicate how true the following statements are for you: I’m often running late when getting things done.”
  - Rated: 1 (not true at all) to 5 (very true)
  - \(M = 2.80 \ (SD = 1.03)\);
  - Cronbach’s alpha = .81

Stressful life events
- Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS; Holmes and Rahe, 1967)
  - 40 items: e.g., Troubles with the boss (23 points), personal injury/illness (53 points), etc.
  - Rated using a weighted sum of total events
  - Sample range = 0 to 770 stress points;
  - \(M = 218.18 \ (SD = 139.46)\)

Mental Health
- Short Form Health Survey
  - (SF-12; Ware, Kosinski, & Keller, 1996)
  - 4 items: e.g., “How much of the time during the past 4 weeks have you felt downhearted and blue?”
  - Rated: 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time)
  - \(M = 3.41 \ (SD = 0.76)\);
  - Cronbach’s alpha = 0.78

Results

Preliminary analyses
- Being older was related to less procrastination \((r = -0.13, p = .021)\).
  - In addition, males reported better mental health \((M = 3.65)\) than did females \((M = 3.34)\), \(t(330) = 3.21, p < .001\).
  - Therefore, primary analyses control for age and gender.

Research Question #1

Are more stressful life events related to worse mental health?

Research Question #2

Does procrastination explain the relation between more stressful life events and worse mental health?

Conclusions

- Overall, it appears that experiencing more stressful life events is linked to worse mental health.
- Importantly, procrastination helps to explain why more stress associated with challenging life events is related to worse mental health.

Clinical Applications
- Clinicians should consider individuals’ tendencies to procrastinate, particularly when adjusting to stressful life events.
  - Developing interventions focused on decreasing tendencies to procrastinate may help with adjustment.
  - Ultimately, decreasing individuals’ tendencies to procrastinate may, in turn, increase global mental health, particularly when adjusting to stress.

Limitations and Future Directions

Cross-sectional analyses
- Do not allow for causal interpretations.
- Future studies should study procrastination as a mediator longitudinally to show causal links between variables.

Homogenous sample
- Primarily Caucasian females limits generalizability to other groups.
- Future research should replicate findings with more diverse groups of individuals, including those of other ages, race, gender, etc.

Contact Information

For additional information, please contact:
Dakota Smith, Junior, Psychology Major
dsmith243@kent.edu
Patricia Tomich, Ph.D.
pptomich@kent.edu