Adolescent stress and coping strategies

What is this summary about?
Academic performance has become one of the most prevalent stressors in western society for adolescents, and certain coping strategies can predict high school dropout (Hess & Copeland, 2001). However, studies on adolescent stress and coping present divergent causes of adolescent stress related to the environment. Moreover, results differ in terms of the way adolescents regulate their stress and coping. This literature review examines the scientific literature on the theme of adolescent stress and coping between 1997 and present and will answer the following questions in order to better understand high school dropout:
Question 1: What are the main causes of adolescents’ environmental stress?
Question 2: How do adolescents regulate their stress and coping?

What did the researchers do?
The researchers used the key words “adolescents”, “coping” and “stress”, and gathered more than 400 scientific articles from several research engines (e.g. “Scholars Portal” and “PsychInfo”) between January 1997 and June 2011 because these dates were considered contemporary covering a 14 year time span. Articles had to be empirical in nature including both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Twenty nine articles were retained based on their relevance; that is, a general adolescent population rather than a clinical or sub-population (e.g. post traumatic stress disorder, clinically depressed, personality disorder, schizophrenic population, etc.). Also, articles that aimed at measurement validations (i.e. questionnaires), that presented ambiguous and/or null hypotheses (non significant results), and conceptual articles were not included.

A content analysis was conducted based on the present researchers ‘conceptual knowledge of the stress and coping literature. The articles were then categorized into two major themes in relation to each research question: (1) environmental stress and (2) cognitive-emotional regulation. Each of the two themes is defined at the beginning of each section. Certain methodological details are briefly
described and incorporated into the literature review when deemed necessary in order to better understand the various articles’ contexts. A summary of the conclusions reached from the reviewed studies concludes each of the two sections.

What did the researchers find?

Research question 1: environmental stress
Environmental stress refers to one’s environment that is both changing and unchanging. Examples of themes related to environmental stresses that are subject to change are: family support, social support, socio-economic status and milieu, parenting behaviour, parental drug abuse, and social and extra-curricular activities. Those that are not subject to change include gender and ethnicity.

Female and male adolescents have seemingly different experiences when coping with stress. Interpersonal stress seems to be more acute for girls whether it be from a breakup or coping with daily stressors at home and at school. All-girl schools have an effect on girls’ sense of belonging, thereby reducing their stress levels. This is a relevant research avenue and consistent with present day debates around same-sex schooling. Boys experience less stress than girls do regarding their bodily self esteem, self-image and health.

Parental smoking and drug abuse do have effects on adolescent stress. Parental stress in itself affects adolescents’ sexual relationships as they engage in more sexual experiences than is true of adolescents whose parents cope more effectively with stress. Parental understanding of their adolescents’ coping strategies helps them in the stress-coping process. Low parental education does have an effect on adolescent stress whereby social economic status, optimism, and stress are linked. High parental optimism leads to engagement and lower adolescent stress. Harsh parenting may not be a salient stressor compared with peer victimization. More research is needed to clarify the relation between parental behaviour and adolescent stress and coping.

Certain environments or milieus seem to induce or reduce stress. Interest and engagement in music seems to help adolescents cope with stressful situations such as writing an exam. Moreover, there are differences between urban and rural adolescents whereby rural adolescents are stressed by unemployment, poverty and
emigration whereas urban adolescents have more conflictual problems and external problems. Urban adolescents should be aware that chronic, uncontrollable stressors are related to hopelessness. Disengagement strategies lead to anxiety and depression. Active coping seems to reduce stress in minority adolescents over time thus providing a promising avenue for future research on the link between stress and coping.

**Research question 2: cognitive-emotional regulation**

Cognitive and emotional regulation refers to internal social and cognitive skills (including self-regulation and metacognition) when confronted by threat or challenge. It often includes the term self. Some of the related themes of cognitive-emotional regulation are: internal (self-control) versus external locus of control, self-esteem, sense of well being, perfectionism, actively seeking social support (family, professional and/or friends) and participating in physical activity.

Similar to the emergent themes in the environmental stress category, adolescents cope with and regulate interpersonal and academic stressors (Byrne et al., 2007). Several studies reviewed here point to an evolution or development of coping strategies over time. Coping strategies become more refined with age and experience. Emotional regulation becomes emotional self regulation and there are differences between internalizing and externalizing behaviour in adolescents, the former being more efficient when coping with stress. A medical study by Roemmich et al (2011) suggests that stress may be linked to disease in those who develop certain cardiovascular stress reactivity, although the authors used some controversial methods to assess cardiovascular activity. Haraldsson et al. (2008) claimed that by engaging in health promotion activities adolescents can improve their sense of well-being related to stress.

Emotional eating is a dysfunctional coping strategy and affects not only obese adolescents but all adolescents. Realistic adolescents regarding their control over life events are less stressed; in fact these adolescents underestimate their coping skills, thereby connoting a certain humility and realism as stated. Further, well adjusted adolescents have higher self esteem and hence seem to cope better than vulnerable and even resilient adolescents. Related to these self-beliefs, adolescents who are perfectionists and who experience the inevitable stress of life tend to be
more anxious and depressed. Being too hard on oneself breeds negative effects. When adolescents have effective and realistic beliefs, mastery and optimism, their stress and depression diminish later on. This is an interesting developmental point that needs to be explored.

Articles reviewed here point towards a developmental change in adolescents whereby adolescents control and understand their stressors better over time, which is a part of the maturing process. Self-control is positively correlated with coping with stressors whereas disengagement is negatively correlated with effective coping with stress. The combination of stress, depression and anxiety lead to low self-esteem. Girls and boys develop their self-regulatory strategies differently over time, with girls internalizing more than boys, who tend to externalize within the stress and coping process. In fact, internal control increases with age whereas distraction and recreation diminish. Those adolescents who maintain their nonacademic activities are more susceptible to dropping out of school, potentially leading to serious societal issues.

**Conclusion**

Academic performance is just one of the many challenges and stressors faced by adolescents. The evolutionary and developmental process of stress and coping must be examined more closely. Adolescents seem to refine their self-regulatory coping strategies over time. Female and male adolescents experience high school differently with females perceiving interpersonal stressors more acutely than male adolescents.

Adolescents who have experienced troubled upbringing have a more difficult time coping with the stress of home and school life, and self-regulatory refinement is more problematic. In fact, these adolescents may tend to drop out of school compared with their peers. However, more research is necessary to examine the relationship between self-regulation and dropout. Further, the link between stress, depression and anxiety is salient and preventive programs for health and well being offer promising future research avenues.
References

About this summary
This research summary was developed from the article: “A literature review and analysis of adolescent stress and coping” by Cameron Montgomery at the University of Ottawa (cmontgom@uottawa.ca)

To access the full article, please click on the following link:
http://oere.oise.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Montgomery_Stress-coping_Full-Article2012.doc

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Key Words
Adolescent, Stress, Stress management, Student health