

How Is Stress Most Effectively Managed?

A Large-Scale Follow-Up Study

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Abstract: In a follow up to a 2011 study (n=3,304), data were analyzed from an ethnically diverse online sample of 10,745 subjects in 42 countries (mainly the U.S. and Canada) in order to rank order four competencies that have been shown in empirical studies to be valuable in the management of stress. The competencies were: Manages/Reduces Sources of Stress, Practices Relaxation Techniques, Manages Thoughts, and Plans and Prevents. As in the previous study, the instrument used to measure the competencies proved to have high internal-consistency reliability and moderate predictive validity. Total scores were predictive of self-reported happiness, personal success, professional success, and general level of stress, with nearly 20 percent of self-reported happiness associated with the ability to manage stress. Large, significant effects were found for educational attainment, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity, with Asians significantly outscoring other groups, a finding that is not explained by our study but that is consistent with other research. No effect was found for gender. Factor and regression analyses pointed to the importance of a competency that can reasonably be called “proactive” stress management; by far, proactive approaches to managing stress proved to be more beneficial than reactive approaches. The new study also appears at first to confirm the frequently-reported finding that moderate levels of stress are beneficial; indeed, we found slight increases in self-reported professional success and other outcome measures when self-reported stress levels were moderate. However, a closer look at the data reveals that this finding is an artifact of the pattern of variability that occurs at different levels of stress. High levels of stress are associated with a wide range of behavioral outcomes from poor to excellent; moderate levels of stress are associated with less extreme outcomes, which leads to the spurious conclusion about the advantages of moderate stress. Our data show clearly, however, that a very low level of stress is associated with the highest modal values of happiness, personal success, and professional success. Given the obvious health and mood benefits of low stress, we conclude that the advantages of low stress far outweigh any possible advantages of moderate stress.