

The Impact of Group Counseling on the Stress of High School Seniors Who are Uncertain about  
Their Post-Secondary Plan

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of group counseling as an intervention for high school seniors who are experiencing stress related to their post-secondary decisions. Research indicates that students' final year of high school is especially stressful when uncertainty about post-secondary plans exists. A counseling group was developed to provide support to students with the aforementioned stress and indecision. Four participants took part in a five-week, discussion-based, counseling group. Participants were administered the Perceived Stress Scale at the commencement and culmination of the group. Following the intervention, participants exhibited a 29.49% decrease in perceived stress, although the results were not statistically significant. Limitations and implications for future research are discussed.

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Stress can influence an adolescent's educational experience, socialization skills, and self-concept, three factors that are developmentally crucial during students' senior year of high school. While the sources of stress and ways in which individual's cope with stress fluctuate, it is inevitable that stress, in one form or another, will be a constant throughout the course of life. Studies have focused on the broad topics related to stress, including the stressors that individuals encounter, the coping strategies they utilize, the symptoms they experience, and the effectiveness of various counseling practices (Plunkett, Radmacher, & Moll-Phanara, 2000). In addition, there has also been research completed on the transitional phases from middle school to high school and from high school to college (Allen & Stoltenberg, 1995). However, there is a lack of research concentrated on interventions used to help high school seniors who are experiencing stress connected with their post-secondary uncertainty. Given the gap in research, the present study sets out to answer the question: does group counseling impact the stress level of high school seniors who are undecided about their post secondary plans? The hypothesis is stated: students' perceived stress scores will decrease following participation in a five-week psychoeducational counseling group. Therefore, the null hypothesis is stated: students' perceived stress scores will not change following participation in a five-week psychoeducational group. Following a review of the important literature regarding stress and group counseling, the methodology, results, and implications for future research will be discussed.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review focuses on two main themes, stress and group counseling. The impact that each has on the experience of high school seniors is examined. Connections between theory and practice will be reviewed in an effort to provide support for the present study.

### **Stress**

With a wide range of definitions overlapping various fields of study ‘stress’ is a concept that individuals often feel they know and understand, but have difficulty defining. Linden (2005) defines stress as, “a mediational process in which stressors (or demands) trigger an attempt at adaptation or resolution that results in individual distress if the organism is unsuccessful in satisfying the demand. Stress responding occurs at physiological, behavioral, and cognitive levels” (p. 2). Personality characteristics, genetic predispositions, and early learning experiences were found to impact the physiological effects and emotional regulation of stress (Linden, 2005). Therefore, two individuals who experience the same stressor may have a unique response to it.

In contrast to the common perception that stress is strictly a ‘negative’ experience, stress plays an important function and it has been vital to mankind’s survival. When the brain senses a stressor, adrenaline is produced, which increases an individual’s mental and physical functioning (Markham, 2003). An increase in heart-rate, breathing rate, and tension of muscles are also physical changes that generally accompany the experience of stress. Researchers believe these physiological reactions are survival mechanisms that were designed to help early humans evade predators and catch prey. The physiological changes that accompany stress can increase an individual’s ability to prepare for vital moments, succeed during athletic competition, and complete assignments with rapidly approaching deadlines. People must learn to cope with their stress in order to reap the benefits of the potentially increased physical and mental capacity.

Over an individual's lifetime, he or she is exposed and predisposed to situations that commonly induce the experience of stress. "Stressful life events derive both from normative experiences of development (e.g. developmental challenges such as puberty, school transitions, increased academic demands), non-normative stressful life events (e.g. divorce, moving to a new place), and daily hassles (e.g. peer group pressure, parent-child conflict"; Moksnes, Byrne, Mazanov, & Espnes, 2010, p. 203.)." With each type of stressful situation the meaning of the event varies in intensity and importance. As a rudimentary rule, the more stress-triggering experiences an individual encounters, the more likely he or she is to suffer negative effects (Linden, 2005). Furthermore, there are intrapersonal factors that impact an individual's experience of and response to stress. For example, when someone suffers from depression, a seemingly inconsequential stressor may turn into an event that triggers a debilitating amount of stress (Lindin, 2005).

Stress manifests itself bodily and the effects can be severe. Markham (2003) describes the following as common physical symptoms that have been linked to the experience of stress: breathlessness, nausea, dizziness, asthma, increased desire to use mood altering drugs, loss of appetite or craving food, insomnia, nightmares, tiredness, indigestion, diarrhea or constipation, headaches, anxiety attacks, neck or back ache, ulcers, eczema, high blood pressure, impotence, increased likelihood for violent behavior, stroke, phobias, heart disease, and cancer. Given the potential for serious physical and psychological harm, it is important that people learn to deal with their stress in an effective way, to help prevent or lessen the aforementioned consequences.

Coping is the way in which individuals overcome their stress. Coping helps to alleviate the physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms of stress. The concept of coping has been one of the most, if not the most, researched topic in the field of psychology (Linden, 2005).

Coping is described as the way, conscious or unconscious, that an individual deals with stress. People possess both innate and learned coping mechanisms for dealing with stress. Coping incorporates elements of cognition, behavior, and physiology, and much like stress, it is unique to the individual and his or her situation (Linden, 2005). Lazarus (2000) identified two clear coping subtypes: problem-focused and emotion focused. Problem-focused coping “embraces behaviors like taking charge of changing the environment or developing an action meant lead to a factual solution, while emotion-focused coping represents attempts to process the affect associated with a threat or challenge” (Linden, 2005, p.53). Accepting and dealing with stress is viewed as the most helpful way to cope with stress and anxiety. Defense mechanisms are unconscious coping strategies that attempt to prevent harm to an individual’s ego. These strategies tend to “deny or distort reality” (Corey, 2008, p. 63), and are not viewed as effective coping strategies. Common defense mechanisms include repression, denial, projection, rationalization, displacement, introjection, regression, sublimation, and compensation (Corey, 2008).

### **Adolescent Stress**

Adolescence is a time that features change in nearly every aspect of an individual’s life (Byrne, Davenport & Mazanov, 2007). The circumstances that trigger stress, the intensity with which it is felt, and the duration of stress are each unique to the adolescent and one’s experience (Moksnes *et al*, 2010). Despite being a time in which individuals succumb to illness or disease less frequently than other life stages, adolescents still face a significantly larger number of stressful occurrences compared to other periods in an individual’s lifespan. This is possibly due to reports that “levels of poverty, violence, and family adversity appear to be increasing” (McMahon, Grant, Compas, Thurm, & Ey, 2003, p. 107). Familial and social relationships are

two of the most common stressors for young people (Santrock, 2011). Researchers noted that increased exposure to stressors result in an increased number of psychological problems during adolescence, in particular, anxiety, depression, nervousness, and irritability (Moksnes *et al*, 2010).

Having the ability to learn how to cope with stress at a young age increases the likelihood that people will be able to have successful coping strategies as adults (Santrock, 2011). As children age, they develop more cognitive coping strategies (Saarni, Campos, Camras & Witherington, 2006), and as they reach puberty having the ability to assess stressful situations and realize the level of control they possess will help them limit the amount of stress they experience. Coping strategies vary in effectiveness and style. Common coping styles include social support (utilizing family, friends, teachers, counselors or religious leaders), self-reliance (listening to music, exercising, problem solving a solution to the problem), or engaging in problem behaviors (using drugs or alcohol, engaging in property destruction; Plunkett *et al*, 2000). Without learning how to cope with stress or adversity as an adolescent, individuals tend to learn unhealthy coping behaviors that often lead to more stressful situations (Santrock, 2011).

Using a litany of adolescent stress, coping and self-esteem scales, Srikala and Kumar (2010) established a life-skills program at the high school level that aimed to teach students the skills they will need to cope with stress and face adversity in life. The results indicated that students who participated in the educational program displayed higher levels of self-esteem and perceived coping skills than those in the control group.

**Senior year stress.** As a whole, adolescence is a period of markedly increased stress. As people near the end of that developmental stage, they are faced with a number of significant decisions and challenges. Students are often faced with academic, social, familial, and personal

decisions. Daigneault (2008) found that an individual's senior year of high school is a time that features increased excitement and increased stress.

High levels of depression, anxiety, and stress were found in a large group of students during their final year of high school (McGraw, Moore, Fuller, & Bates, 2008). One reason for the high levels of stress is the experience of career exploration and career decision-making (Taviera, Silv, Rodríguez, & Maia, 1998). Depression, anxiety, and stress can interfere with students' capacity to achieve academic success and limit their ability to make informed and educated decisions about their future. Failure to make informed decisions then produces a cyclical pattern of stress. Other than the aforementioned survey studies, there has been minimal research focused on the stressful nature of the high school seniors' experience, especially related to indecision regarding post-secondary plans. In contrast, the transitional phase from middle school to high school has garnered the focus of many researchers. Studies have typically found an increase in stress level and anxiety in eighth grade students transitioning to high school (Hertzog, & Morgan, 1997).

In a year-long series of surveys, students reported feeling stressed about the post-secondary decision-making process (Galotti & Kozberg, 1996). They reported on their stress at the beginning, middle and end of their senior year. Students reported feeling stressed throughout the whole year, but the stress levels decreased slightly from beginning to end. The high school seniors surveyed viewed their post-secondary choices as a 'life-framing' decision (Galotti & Kozberg, 1996). The students also reported feeling more prepared and confident to make their decisions by the end of the year. In another survey study, twelfth grade students were asked about their anticipated stresses associated with life after high school. They identified, "money, career, life during college, living on my own, college academics, leaving family/friends, being

successful, life after college, not sure of career, and the ‘real world’ (Daigneault, 2008)” as the features they were most concerned about. This long list implies that in addition to the academic, familial, and social stressors that are impacting them in relation to their present situation, twelfth grade students also have a significant fear and concern about their future, especially decisions involving educational paths or career plans.

**Adolescent career indecision.** Career indecision has been described as a multidimensional construct that includes, but is not limited to, having uncertainty regarding an educational plan, college major, or possible career (Kraus & Hughey, 1999). Essentially, any feelings of uncertainty regarding a decision that is considered important to a potential career path would be considered career indecision.

While it should be neither required nor expected that all high school students will have a clear career plan that requires no deviation, it is important that students begin to assess their own skills, interests, and goals in relation to educational and career paths. In addition, students often feel pressure to have a clear career plan at a young age, which is commonly a product of perceived expectations from family members, school faculty, and peers.

Betz and Voyten (1997) found that the acquisition of career information is inversely correlated with career indecision (Betz & Voyten, 1997), which makes up one-third of Frank Parsons’ ‘trait-and-factor’ career development theory. Parsons believed that individuals need to acquire career information, obtain knowledge of self, and utilize appropriate decision making skills in order to make informed decisions that would lead to satisfaction in the workplace (Niles & Bowsbey, 2009).

Heppner and Hendricks (1995) found that anxiety, low self-confidence, and issues of dependency are all correlated with feelings of career indecision. It is important that adolescents

are able to cope with the stress and anxiety that is associated with career indecision, because individuals who are emotionally aroused or overwhelmed are more likely to make unwise or reckless decisions (Steinberg, 2008). Support and encouragement were found to be important factors in assisting indecisive individuals (Germieijs, Verschueren & Soenens, 2006), and are also a few of the basic tenets of group counseling.

### **Group Counseling**

Group counseling is an import delivery system that is utilized in schools. Group counseling offers group members a unique opportunity to share their experiences with a group of people who are in a similar position. Many of the important factors that lead to positive intrapersonal change are also tenants of group counseling. Yalom (2005) generated a list of factors that drive the therapeutic process for effective groups that has helped scholars understand how and why group counseling is effective. His 11 factor model includes: instillation of hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socialization techniques, imitative behavior; interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis, and existential factors. Yalom emphasized the importance of a shared group process as an important factor in the growth of clients who participated in group counseling. Similarly to Yalom's factors, Jacobs, Masson and Harvill (2009) explained that group counseling provides clients with, "feelings of commonality, the experience of belonging, the chance to practice new behaviors, the opportunity for feedback, the opportunity for vicarious learning by listening and observing others, the approximation to real-life encounters, and the pressure to uphold commitments" (p. 2), that are not always applicable to other delivery methods. Erford (2010) discusses the importance of groups by mentioning that group counseling allows individuals to feel a greater sense of self-confidence and acceptance of themselves and

others, by way of a shared group process. As group members share their thoughts, feelings or behaviors, other members often discover the fact that they are not alone with their problems.

Connectedness is an important concept in the world of counseling, and especially group counseling. In the wake of a traumatic experience, Murtonen, Suomalainen, Haravuori, and Marttunen (2012) found that nearly all students surveyed felt that the psychosocial support of friends and family members was important to their healing. Similarly, Kiliç, Erol, and Kiliç (2001) surveyed high school students regarding their coping strategies. They found that utilizing social support has a positive effect on self-esteem when coping with their problems. Group counseling can be an effective method for providing individuals a setting that supplies positive social support (Jacobs *et al*, 2005).

**Group counseling: stress.** There have been many studies that focus on stress reduction for specific populations, including: PTSD following tragic events (Sloan, Bovin, & Schnurr, 2012), sexual trauma (Fritch, & Lynch, 2008), and alcohol abuse (Crits-Christoph, Johnson, Connolly, Gibbons, & Gallop, 2013). However, there is a dearth of research regarding the impact that group counseling has on the stress of adolescents. Many of the important features of group counseling relate well with the needs of adolescents who experience stress.

**Group counseling in schools.** Given the time constraints and financial limitations that many school counselors face, group counseling is often viewed as an important and efficient delivery system. Group counseling allows counselors the opportunity to work with a larger number of clients in a shorter amount of time. It also provides students with unique learning experiences that would not be possible in individual counseling or lecture-style classroom presentations (Akos & Martin, 2003; Corey, 2008). School counselors have created and adopted group counseling to fit the needs of their population (Eford, 2010). In schools, group counseling

has been shown to be an effective method for the reduction of stress and career indecision (Jacobs *et al*, 2009; Datu, 2012). In addition, group counseling has been shown to increase academic success (Webb & Brigman, 2007). This is especially important in today's educational landscape, given the focus on student test scores and teacher performance reviews.

In a meta-analysis designed to assess the effectiveness of small-group counseling and classroom psychoeducation on specific populations, Gerrity and DeLucia-Waack (2007) reviewed literature surrounding counseling groups that focused on eating disorders, bullying and anger management, child abuse prevention, pregnancy prevention, and social competency. The researchers found that in general, small group interventions were effective in schools, especially when tailored to fit specific areas of concern.

### **Method**

This study was conducted in a suburban high school in upstate New York. Four high school seniors participated in a five-week group counseling design. Participants completed the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) at the beginning of the first session and at the end of the final session. The results of the PSS were used to quantify the extent to which participants were impacted by their participation in the group. Information regarding the research design, population in question, participant selection methods, overview of group sessions, and a description of the PSS is mentioned in the forthcoming chapter.

### **Research Design**

The study utilized a pre-test/ post-test design to acquire quantitative data for the interval (PSS score) and nominal (group counseling treatment) variables under review. This design allows for the collection of data that is required in order to make inferences regarding the research question and hypothesis following the group counseling intervention.

## Participants

Four twelfth-grade students—all females—took part in this study. Since only four students agreed to participate in the study, the results are insufficient to be generalized across the entire population. Each participant was 17 years-old and had recently begun their senior year at a public, suburban high school in upstate New York. The school's senior class contains 344 students. Three of the participants identified as 'White,' and one of the participants identified as 'Asian or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander.' According to the 2013 school report the racial/ethnic origin of the population is as follows: White, 89%; Black or African American, 4%; Hispanic or Latino, 4%; Asian or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, <1%; American Indian or Native Alaskan, <1%; Multiracial, <1% (New York, 2013). Fifteen percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Socioeconomic information was not obtained for the present study.

Participants were selected using a convenience sample. The primary researcher met with school counselors at his internship site. The researcher explained the purpose, procedures, and potential benefits of the study. The counselors were asked to nominate students on their caseload who were potential candidates for the study. Students who have had prior communication with their counselor regarding stress associated with post-secondary planning were said to be appropriate candidates. Twenty-one students were referred for possible inclusion in the study. The primary researcher then conducted a brief interview with each of the referred students. The interviews took approximately 10 minutes. The interviews were used to gauge the potential participants' stress and post-secondary uncertainty, to explain the nature of the study, and if appropriate, to invite their participation. During the interviews, students were asked to discuss their potential plans after high school, their current stress levels, and to talk about how the

decision-making process was going for them. If a student mentioned feeling stress and uncertainty about his or her current plans, one was invited to participate in the study. Students who did not express the aforementioned stressors were thanked for meeting with the primary researcher and were excused. Students who declined to participate were encouraged to meet with their school counselor or the primary researcher one-on-one in an effort to help manage their stress. Students who agreed to participate were given a recruitment letter and consent form and asked to return the signed copies by the student and a parent or guardian (See Attachments A, B, C, and D).

### **Treatment**

Participants took part in the 45-minute group once per week for five weeks. The study took seven weeks to complete due to a scheduling conflict and an illness to the primary researcher. A conference room adjacent to the school's counseling center was used as the meeting place for the group. The group met during periods in which three of the four participants had lunch or a 'free' period. Participants were only excused from elective classes, and only after receiving permission from the student and the teacher. Participants were informed to go to their class at the beginning of the period—for attendance purposes—prior to arriving at the counseling center. No student missed the same class more than twice. Food was provided for participants.

Prior to the commencement of the group, participants were given consent forms that outlined the rules regarding confidentiality. Participants were informed that all topics and conversations that took place during the group were to remain in the confines of the group. Failure to comply with the aforementioned rule would result in the participant-in-question being asked to not return to the group.

**Session one.** The first group session began by the primary researcher thanking the participants for their time and contributions to the group. The primary researcher then outlined how the participants' confidentiality will be upheld throughout the researcher's thesis study. An explanation of the limits of confidentiality was also discussed. Participants were informed that nothing they said in the confines of the group would be discussed outside of the group unless there were reasons to suspect child abuse, or that a participant was at serious risk to harm oneself or others. A recap of the confidentiality agreement as listed on the consent form then followed.

Participants were asked to introduce themselves and then they took part in an ice-breaker activity. Each participant was asked to choose three people—living or deceased—with whom they would like to meet, and explain their choices. Following the activity, the primary researcher further explained the purpose of the group and the general format of each session. The session was concluded after each participant was asked to share about her current plans after high school and to elaborate on how stress has been impacting her senior year experience. The group treatment was created by the primary researcher in an effort to maximize the participants' opportunity to connect with fellow group members.

**Session two.** The second session began with participants describing their goals for the group. Lowering the amount of stress felt and having a more clear understanding of what they wanted to do after high school were the goals that the participants mentioned. Participants were encouraged to continue conversations regarding specific college questions, potential academic majors, or career questions with their counselors or with the primary researcher outside of the group time.

The group spent the remaining time discussing how the stress surrounding their post-secondary indecision was impacting their day-to-day functioning. Group members shared

specific ways in which they have been struggling to control their emotions, preserve important relationships, succeed academically, and manage their many activities.

**Session three.** Session three focused on ways in which participants cope with their stressors. The primary researcher discussed healthy and unhealthy ways in which individuals can cope with stress. Participants were then asked to discuss the various ways in which they attempt to cope with stress. Each participant mentioned talking with friends about their stress as a successful coping skill. Three of the girls mentioned journaling and listening to music as something they do to help alleviate their stress. One participant mentioned talking with parents or another adult as a commonly used coping skill. Another participant cited exercise as a valuable skill.

The primary researcher then asked the participants what things they might do that could potentially be counter-productive toward reaching their goals. A discussion regarding procrastination and avoidance ensued. Participants discussed how they commonly avoid their problems, and how that ends up hurting them in the long run. At the conclusion of the discussion the participants came to the mutual conclusion that they wanted to confront their indecision and begin taking steps toward answering their questions.

**Session four.** The fourth session was cut short due to two of the participants having a prior obligation with a visiting college representative. The abbreviated session lasted 20 minutes. After noticing a trend in previous sessions, the primary researcher discussed the concept of self-defeating thoughts and behaviors. Participants were asked to discuss whether or not they feel this is something they do, and if so, how it impacts their stress level and overall well-being.

**Session five.** The final session began with participants being asked to discuss how their current situations regarding their plans for after high school have changed since the beginning of

the group. Participants referenced going on college visits, meeting with college representatives, and retaking standardized tests, as actions taken outside of the group that have helped shape their plans since session one. The group then discussed what stressors and worries they had while looking ahead until the end of the school year. The group concluded with each participant completing the PSS. Participants were thanked for their commitment and advised to contact their school counselor or the primary researcher with any questions or concerns related to their post-high school planning or stress.

### **Instrumentation**

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was used to quantify the experience of stress for each participant. The instrument was delivered at the commencement of the first session and the conclusion of the final session. The primary researcher elected to use the PSS-10, which is a 10-question version of the survey: instead of the 4-question and 14-question versions. The PSS provides participants the option to select among five ratings on a Likert-type scale (0=Never, 1=Almost Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Fairly Often, 4=Very Often). The PSS gauges how the participant perceives the extent to which his or her life is uncontrollable, unpredictable, and overloaded. The PSS was found to be a reliable and valid self-reporting measurement among students (Roberti, Harrington & Storch, 2006). After adding the ten responses together, participants score between 0-40. The higher the total score, the higher the individual's perceived stress level. Four of the questions are considered "reverse coding" questions (Cohen, 2013), and the scores must be flipped. Those four questions are positively stated; therefore the scores must be changed to align with the other six negatively stated items. For example, a raw data score '4' would have a coded score of '0,' and a raw data score of '3' would have a coded

score of '1.' An example of a reverse coding question is, "In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way."

A coding system was utilized to keep the confidentiality for students' responses on the PSS. During the first session, the primary researcher laid out a name tag and a blank PSS in front of each seat. A small symbol (circle, square, star, or dash.) was placed in the bottom-right corner of each assessment. Each symbol was matched with a participant; the list of corresponding names and symbols was kept off-site in a locked cabinet.

### **Data Analysis**

The results from the PSS were analyzed by comparing the means of the pre-test and post-test and by testing for statistical significance using a paired-samples *t*-test to assess the extent to which students' perceived stress scores would decrease following participation in a five-week psychoeducational counseling group.

### **Results**

Following the completion of the post-tests, participants' results were compared to the pre-test scores using a comparison of means—to test for the extent of the change in perceived stress following the intervention—as seen in Table 1. In addition, a paired-samples *t*-test was utilized to assess the statistical significance between pre- and post-tests. The mean for participants' pre-test scores was 19.5, with a standard deviation of 7.85. The mean for post-test scores was 13.75, with a standard deviation of 7.85. The difference was set at 95% for the paired-samples *t*-test, meaning there is a 5% chance that the disparity between pre- and post-test results is a product of chance. The difference between pre-test scores and post-test scores was not found to be statistically significant,  $t(3) = 1.60, p = .21$  (see Table 2). Therefore, the hypothesis—students' perceived stress scores will decrease following participation in a five-

week psychoeducational counseling group—was unable to be affirmed, given the lack of statistical significance. The research question—does group counseling impact the stress level of high school seniors who are undecided about their post secondary plans?—was also not confirmed via statistical significance. Participants' PSS scores decreased by an average of 29.49% following the intervention.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>
Pre-test	4	19.50	7.85	3.93
Post-test	4	13.75	7.85	3.92

*Note.* *N* = sample size; *M*= mean; *SD*= standard deviation; *SEM*= Standard Error of the Mean

Table 2

*Pair-Samples Test*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	95% CI		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (2-tailed)
				L	U			
Pretest and Posttest	5.7	7.18	3.59	-5.68	17.18	1.6	3	.208

*Note.* CI= confidence interval; L= lower limit; U= upper limit; *t*= t-value; *df*= degrees of freedom; *P*= p-value

### Discussion

This study was conducted to quantify the effectiveness of group counseling as an intervention for high school seniors who are experiencing stress related to their post-secondary uncertainty. Four participants attended five discussion-based group counseling sessions facilitated by the primary researcher. Each participant completed the ten-question PSS in a pre-test/post-test fashion.

The group quickly formed a comfort level that allowed them to enter the working stage of group processing by the second session (Jacobs *et al.*, 2009). This could have been the result of

the participants having familiarity with one another; however, none of the participants were “close friends” prior to the group’s commencement. Participants scored 29.49% lower on the PSS post-test—following the group counseling intervention. In addition, participants described the experience of being a group member as positive. They also explained that participation helped to alleviate some of the stress they were experiencing. Given the results of this study, it would be in the best interest of school counseling programs to consider utilizing the group counseling format while working with their senior students who are uncertain about their post-secondary plan.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Potential participants’ class schedules made it difficult to recruit and schedule group sessions. A few students who were interviewed and invited to participate in the group were unable to participate due to a full class schedule and activities after school. In addition, despite inviting several male students to participate in the study, the only students to accept were female. These troubles led to the female-only sample size of four. Given the low participant number, generalizations on the population were unable to be made.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Considering the results did not prove to be statistically significant despite a nearly 30% decrease between pre-test and post-test results, it would be advantageous to attempt to duplicate the study with a larger sample size. If a larger sample size was possible, the primary researcher could potentially group participants with similar concerns or uncertainties in more specific groups. This could allow for deeper feelings of commonality and allow for more worthwhile feedback from groups members in similar situations, which are important factors in the effectiveness of group counseling (Jacobs *et al.*, 2009).

In addition to collecting data on the stress level of participants, future studies might research other areas as well. Considering it has been found that grades are negatively impacted by stress (Linden, 2005) and positively impacted by group counseling (Webb & Brigman, 2007), acquiring data before and after the intervention—and potentially tracking students after the completion of the study—would be a worthwhile endeavor. Another possibility is to assess how group counseling impacts the participants' level of uncertainty.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that stress plays a major role in the lives of all of us—especially adolescents. As adolescents approach the end of their high school career, they face a number of stressors and challenges that are unique to the developmental phase. The educational and career options that are available to high school seniors are plentiful and a number of important decisions loom. The stress that is associated with making major life decisions only adds additional stress to the already lengthy list of common stressors that adolescent students encounter. It is important that school counselors focus on the stress that is associated with the decision-making process, in addition to their understanding of students' self-knowledge and information gathering. The counseling group created in this study was able to decrease participants' perceived stress score by nearly 30%. By adjusting some of the techniques used in the current study, a future incarnation would be able again test to see if there is statistical significance in the results.

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## Appendix A

## Recruitment Letter

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in a group counseling study designed to help high school senior's cope with the stress of indecision regarding their post-secondary plans. The group will consist of six sessions that will focus on teaching information about stress and decision making, as well as a shared group process between students. If you are invited to participate, you will be asked to complete the Perceived Stress Scale (a ten-question stress inventory), during the first and last sessions to gauge the effectiveness of the group. Your participation is completely voluntary and if you decide to participate you may choose to quit at any time with no penalty.

The group will be facilitated by primary researcher, Kevin Donohue, school counseling intern at Webster Schroeder High School and graduate student from the College at Brockport. Results will be used for the completion of the primary researcher's master's thesis.

I greatly appreciate your consideration regarding this group. My aim is to help you deal with the stress of the uncertainty and to help you plan for your future, *not* to tell you which path to take.

Please feel free to see me in the Counseling Center anytime or e-mail me at [kevin\\_donohue@websterschools.org](mailto:kevin_donohue@websterschools.org) if you have any questions or concerns.

You may also contact Robert Dobmeier, faculty advisor from The College at Brockport, at [rdobmeie@u.brockport.edu](mailto:rdobmeie@u.brockport.edu) or 585-395-5090.

Thank you,

Kevin Donohue

## Appendix B

## Recruitment Letter

Dear Parent,

Your child has been invited to participate in a group counseling study designed to help high school senior's cope with the stress of indecision regarding their post-secondary plans. The group will consist of six sessions that will focus on teaching information about stress and decision making, as well as a shared group process between students. If your child is invited to participate, they will be asked to complete the Perceived Stress Scale (a ten-question stress inventory), during the first and last sessions to gauge the effectiveness of the group. Your child's participation is completely voluntary and if they decide to participate they may choose to quit at any time with no penalty.

The group will be facilitated by primary researcher, Kevin Donohue, school counseling intern at Webster Schroeder High School and graduate student from The College at Brockport. Results will be used for the completion of the primary researcher's master's thesis.

I greatly appreciate your consideration regarding this group. My aim is to help your child deal with the stress of the uncertainty and to help them plan for their future, *not* to tell you which path to take.

Please feel free to see me in the Counseling Center anytime or e-mail me at [kevin\\_donohue@websterschools.org](mailto:kevin_donohue@websterschools.org) if you have any questions or concerns.

You may also contact Robert Dobmeier, faculty advisor from The College at Brockport, at [rdobmeie@u.brockport.edu](mailto:rdobmeie@u.brockport.edu) or 585-395-5090.

Thank you,  
Kevin Donohue

## Appendix C

**The impact of group counseling on the stress of high school seniors who are uncertain about their post-secondary plans**

Department of Counselor Education  
The College at Brockport, State University of New York

Statement of Informed Consent (student 18 years old)

The purpose of this research study is to examine the impact group counseling has on the stress of high school seniors who remain uncertain about their post-secondary plans. This study is requirement of the primary researcher's master's thesis. The goal of the research is to reduce the stress that you are experiencing related to your post-secondary plans. This study hopes to add to the previous research on adolescent stress. Your informed consent is required in order to participate in this study.

One possible benefit of this research is that your stress level may decrease. One possible drawback from participating in this research is that you may be asked to disclose information of a personal nature. You will not be required to share any information and will be able to decline to comment if you do not feel comfortable. This study will have no impact on your grades or class standing.

## Confidentiality/Group Rules:

1. Anything that is said between group members is not to be repeated outside of the group, even between members of the group
2. Individuals will display respect toward each fellow group member
3. Failure to comply with any rules will result in the student in question being asked not to return to the group

## I understand that:

1. My participation is completely voluntary and I have the right to refuse to participate or continue with the study at any time.
2. My participation involves completing the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), completing a questionnaire about my stress and the impact of the group, and taking part in six group counseling sessions that will involve both elements of education and a shared group process.
3. Approximately 15 students will take part in the group. The results will be used to contribute to the primary researcher's graduate thesis.
4. My confidentiality will be protected. Once I completed the PSS the results will be kept in a locked filing cabinet off of school grounds, and they will be shredded following the completion of research project. You will never be mentioned by name at any point during the thesis.
5. Any data entered onto a password-protected computer will be coded, and will be deleted upon completion of the primary researcher's thesis.

- 6. I understand that I may change my mind at any time and I may remove myself from the study at any point without penalty.
- 7. The sessions will take place in a conference room at Webster Schroeder High School, and will be schedules around
- 8. Meetings will take place either immediately after school or during a block when participants are free

I have read and understand the above statements. I am 18 years or older and I agree to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Please feel free to contact the primary researcher or his faculty advisor with any questions or concerns.

*Primary Researcher:* Kevin Donohue, 585-489-9285, [kdono7@u.brockport.edu](mailto:kdono7@u.brockport.edu)

*Faculty Advisor:* Robert Dobmeier, 585-395-5090, [rdobmeie@u.brockport.edu](mailto:rdobmeie@u.brockport.edu)

## Appendix D

**The impact of group counseling on the stress of high school seniors who are uncertain about their post-secondary plans**

Department of Counselor Education  
The College at Brockport, State University of New York

Assent (student under 18)

The purpose of this research study is to examine the impact group counseling has on the stress of high school seniors who remain uncertain about their post-secondary plans. This study is requirement of the primary researcher's master's thesis. The goal of the research is to reduce the stress that you are experiencing related to your post-secondary plans. This study hopes to add to the previous research on adolescent stress. Your informed consent is required in order to participate in this study.

One possible benefit of this research is that your stress level may decrease. One possible drawback from participating in this research is that you may be asked to disclose information of a personal nature. You will not be required to share any information and will be able to decline to comment if you do not feel comfortable. This study will have no impact on your grades or class standing.

## Confidentiality/Group Rules:

1. Anything that is said between group members is not to be repeated outside of the group, even between members of the group
2. Individuals will display respect toward each fellow group member
3. Failure to comply with any rules will result in the student in question being asked not to return to the group

## I understand that:

1. My participation is completely voluntary and I have the right to refuse to participate or continue with the study at any time.
2. My participation involves completing the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), completing a questionnaire about my stress and the impact of the group, and taking part in six group counseling sessions that will involve both elements of education and a shared group process.
3. Approximately 15 students will take part in the group. The results will be used to contribute to the primary researcher's graduate thesis.
4. My confidentiality will be protected. Once I completed the PSS the results will be kept in a locked filing cabinet off of school grounds, and they will be shredded following the completion of research project. You will never be mentioned by name at any point during the thesis.
5. Any data entered onto a password-protected computer will be coded, and will be deleted upon completion of the primary researcher's thesis.

- 6. I understand that I may change my mind at any time and I may remove myself from the study at any point without penalty.
- 7. My parent has given permission, but I can still choose to participate or not.
- 8. The sessions will take place in a conference room at Webster Schroeder High School, and will be schedules around
- 9. Meetings will take place either immediately after school or during a block when participants are free

I have read and understand the above statements. I agree to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Please feel free to contact the primary researcher or his faculty advisor with any questions or concerns.

*Primary Researcher:* Kevin Donohue, 585-489-9285, kdono7@u.brockport.edu

*Faculty Advisor:* Robert Dobmeier, 585-395-5090, rdobmeie@u.brockport.edu