

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PERCEIVED SOURCES OF STRESS AND COPING  
STRATEGIES AMONGST ADOLESCENTS AT A SECONDARY IN KWAZULU-NATAL.**

**Submitted as a dissertation component in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Education**

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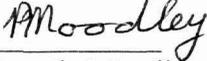
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## Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this mini-thesis is my own, and that reference to the work by any other persons has been duly acknowledged.

  
Pamela Moodley

Durban, January 2003

## Abstract

In this study, a self-report questionnaire was used to obtain a picture of sources of stress amongst a sample of 150 adolescents (75 male and 75 female) at a secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal. Students scored the intensity of stress on a four point stress scale. In addition, students completed similar rating scales to assess self-esteem and depression amongst the students, and to obtain a picture of coping strategies they used. Findings revealed that students, both male and female, perceived the main sources of stress to be related to academic and life stress factors such as: the fact that there is too much schoolwork, being nervous to speak in front of the class, the worry that they may not pass grade 11, fear of being a victim of crime or violence, fear of losing a loved one, being prone to over-react to things, fear of not finding a job upon leaving school. Male students also reported fear of contracting a serious illness as a source of stress. The study found a significant negative correlation between stress and self-esteem, and a significant positive correlation between stress and depression. The findings on coping strategies indicates that the most frequently used coping strategies are: talking to friends, turning to religion, thinking positive thoughts. However, the number of students who responded in the categories 'often' and 'all the time' was fairly low: It is interesting to note that although students did not perceive family factors as key stressors in their lives, only 43 students talked to parents when experiencing stress. There was evidence of gender differences in the use of certain strategies. 25 males and 12 females indicated that they turn to religion 'all the time' as a means of dealing with stressors in their lives. More males (21) than females (6) use the strategy of talking to friends 'all the time'.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Early adolescence is a time in which change is experienced in almost every aspect of life – physical, affective, social, cognitive, family, and education (Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1997). Adolescence therefore is seen as a period of transitions and challenges experienced through a series of passages from immaturity into maturity of a developing adolescent (Lohman and Jarvis, 1999). Physical development in itself is a major change that the adolescent has to deal with, but these changes are accompanied by new feelings about the self, parents, friends, adults such as teachers, change of school, school curriculum, and activities, including parties and sport. These transitions and challenges are sometimes stressful. Stress is not a phenomenon characteristic of the adolescent period. In fact people at every stage experience stress.

Selje (1974) defines stress as the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it. It is important to note that not all stress is bad as some stress is necessary for balance in an individual's life. However, adverse responses to stress can have serious implications for an individual's social adjustment. It is this area of adjustment that has led to concern and considerable amount of research in many countries in the world (Burnett & Fanshawe, 1996). Burnett and Fanshawe explain that adolescent stress and the factors that contribute to it are popular topics for research. There have also been many studies done on the coping strategies employed by people to deal

with stress in their lives (for example, Stern & Zevon, cited in Lohman and Jarvis, 1999).

Campemole (cited in Kruger, 1995) argues that it does not help to categorise stressors, but many researchers have indeed categorised stressors according to the threat they present. One categorisation has been innate versus acquired stress. Stressors have been placed into categories including physical, psychological, and psychosocial events (Payne & Hahn cited in Kruger, 1995). Physical stressors are environmental factors such as temperature, lighting, and noise that influence behaviour. Irrational interpretation of events leading to emotional consequences are examples of psychological stressors (Elias, 1971). Interpersonal interactions affecting a person's behaviour negatively are psychosocial stressors.

Stress in adolescents, which is the focus of this study, is of particular interest to researchers because this period is regarded as the time during which adolescents experience many physical and social changes which are said to produce stress. It is therefore understandable that the period of adolescence requires the greatest amount of adjustment so that life is meaningful to the individual. There are four main areas of stress in the life of adolescents. These are the family (Montemayor, 1983); school, peers (Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1997), and life situations such as illness or tragedy. The difference between well-adjusted individuals and those that have difficulty adjusting, is their ability to deal with stress and the support they can access in dealing with stress producing situations.

This study investigates how adolescents view stress in their lives. It focuses on their experiences of stress in the family, school, peer relationships, and life situations. The interrelationships between the four types of stressors are assumed to determine the level of adjustment of the adolescents. Closely related to stress are factors such self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. These issues will also be examined to a lesser degree than stress. The main reason for examining these factors in this study is to explore the associations among these factors. The study also examines the ways in which adolescents deal with stress and the role played by the family, school, and peers in their coping. By using a sample with equal number of male and female subjects, it is hoped to explore gender differences, if any, with regard to the topics being examined.

## CHAPTER TWO: PERSPECTIVES ON STRESS IN ADOLESCENCE

### 2.1 Introduction

The literature reviewed in this chapter is mainly of research conducted internationally as local research appears to be very limited. The review focuses on the areas this study aims to examine, namely, the nature of stressors in the lives of adolescents, and the relationship between stress and two other factors: depression and self-esteem. In addition, the aim is to examine findings in research that has documented coping strategies used by adolescents to deal with stress. Theories on the nature of stress in adolescence may provide the framework for a comparative analysis of the findings in this study.

### 2.2 Understanding adolescent stress?

According to Kohn & Frazer (1986) the subject of stress is receiving widespread attention as a subject of study, and both researchers and the general public show keen interest in the subject. One of the reasons for this may be that the negative effects of stress have a high cost for society not only through human life and suffering, but the economic ramifications and medical costs (Hoiberg cited in Kohn & Frazer, 1986). Wynder (cited in Kohn & Frazer, 1986) state that physicians in general practice estimate one-half to

three-quarters of their patients seek relief from stress-related symptoms. Many studies in the area of adolescent stress have been conducted internationally and several common features have emerged. Millings Monk & Mahmood (1999) state that students in the world form a large percentage of the population, but psychological issues among students appear to be overlooked in many institutions where education occurs. Even where there are student advisory services available, these are inadequate to deal with mental problems. This makes research into the mental and health problems of students vital in the search for means to address this shortcoming.

### **2.2.1 The nature of adolescence stress**

The majority of the stressors in adolescence have been found to relate to day-to-day hassles ( Lazarus & DeLongis; Goldberg & Comstock, cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998). Three main day-to-day problems were reported. These are problems concerning family relationships, school achievements, and peer relationships. Although day-to-day hassles are regarded as problems which are not very serious, they nevertheless seem to be the source of a great deal of stress in many adolescents. Compas (cited in Lohman and Jarvis, 1999) identify adolescent stressors which fall in three categories. These are: 1) major life changes, 2) chronically stressful conditions, 3) and day-to-day hassles. According to Compas (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1999), problems with family relationships, school achievement, and peer relationships were the three most common day-to-day hassles. Adolescents have conflicting feelings and doubts concerning their relationships in these areas and therefore present with symptoms of stress if they cannot handle these feelings successfully.

Compas also states that the day-to-day hassles are greater predictors of negative health symptoms than major life events during the adolescent period.

Hauser and Bowllds (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1999) identify grade transition, pubertal changes, pressures to conform and increased temptations to experiment with drugs and sexual activities as some of the challenges that were potentially stress producing situations for the adolescent. The adolescent who is developing may not cope with the many confusing challenges they have to face all at the same time. This then makes adjustment very difficult for them and they then could manifest the stress in problem behaviours such as drug or alcohol abuse.

## **2.2.2 Insights from International Studies on Adolescent Stress**

### ***2.2.2.1 Factors associated with stress***

Phelps & Jarvis (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1999) studied 484 ninth to twelfth grade students and found that adolescent stress was related to issues such as parental and peer conflicts, grades and academic concerns, and extracurricular activities. Elkind (1984) stated that adolescents in the United States today experience three times as many stress-related problems as did teenagers 15 years ago. This suggests that the high school experience could play a major role in causing stress for adolescents. The reasons for this according to Elkind (1984) are the move towards larger schools, proliferation of smorgasbord curriculum (curriculum with a large variety of content), and the psychological distancing of teachers towards students. More recently, Elias (1989) states that more and more students in America are becoming psychological victims in the

education system's unilateral drive to improve standards of education in American schools. However, this is not a phenomenon unique to American schools. Comparative studies among English and American adolescents by West (cited in Burnett and Fanshawe, 1996) came up with similar results. Students in both the countries revealed school-related stress as the main problem they encountered daily, especially excessive demands of schooling. Isralowitz and Hong (cited in Burnett & Fanshawe, 1996) did a similar study in Singapore and their findings support the arguments of Elkind (1984) and Elias(1989) that the school presented the most stressful demand on the adolescent. The school-related problems these studies identified included the pressure to keep up with their schoolwork, worrying about the future, and needing help with schoolwork.

A study of stress, social support and adjustment in 482 sixth, seventh and eighth grade students in a middle school in the Northeast American students was done by Wenz-Gross & Siperstein (1997). The subjects were selected from three schools and based on grade structure from grade six through to grade twelve. The sample was selected to represent gender, economic as well as cultural backgrounds. Family status ranged from middle-to upper-middle-income and educational level. Minority background subjects numbered 16% (3%African American, 4% Asian, 2% Latino, and 7% other minorities).The 47-item School Stress Inventory (Siperstein & Wenz-Gross) was given to assess student stress. The respondents had to rate on a 4-point scale (1= not upset to 4= very upset) items which occurred in school. If the item did not occur, they filled in a zero. To assess social support they usedthe "My Family

and Friends” interview (Reid, Landesman, Treder, & Jaccard, cited in Wenz-Gross and Siperstein, 1997). Here dialogue is used to measure four types of support: emotional, informational, instrumental, and companionship. The results revealed that the learning environment in a middle school becomes more complex and the expectations to achieve academically increase with each higher grade in school. The results of this study support the importance of stress and social support in the understanding of adjustment of adolescents in the middle school. The results also indicate that it is important to consider the type of stress and the source and type of support when looking at adjustment outcomes. Higher academic stress and less emotional support from the family were related to lower academic self-concept, and higher peer stress and less companionship support from peers were associated with lower social self-concept. If there was emotional support from the family, the feelings of depression and influences of peer stress were reduced. High academic stress related to poor academic self-concept and high teacher and school rule stress. This indicated that high academic stress usually was accompanied by dislike of the teacher and the rules of the school. High peer stress also led to feelings of depression and only teacher and school rule stress related to dislike of school. School stress involved things like completion of homework assignments on time or the achievement of grades in an examination.

Lohman and Jarvis (2000) did a study of 42 adolescents aged 11 – 18 (27 male and 15 female subjects). The participants came from three public secondary schools in a Midwestern American community where the majority were of Caucasian origin. Only two of the subjects did not come from a

family that was intact. One of the two lived with the mother who had custody and the other's father was deceased. The participants had to list up to ten stressors they experienced in the past 2 months in the order of significance in their lives. Both the male and female participants reported that school was the most stressful (59.26% and 66.66% respectively), with family coming second and peer stress third. They found that school problems led to three types of stress, namely academic, problem-solving, and teacher or school rule related stress. Kohn and Frazer (1986) studied academic stress in 202 students (52.1% female and 49.9% male participants). The participants were asked to identify the five most significant stressors they encounter in their academic experience. From the list they provided, 35 items were identified as high stress sources. These items were then administered to 498 students from four mid-western universities to assess the importance of each item. The sample was predominantly Caucasian with only 14% being blacks. Final grades was found to produce the highest levels of stress, followed by excessive homework and term papers. Another study measuring school-related stress was carried out by Burnett and Fanshawe (1996). The sample was 1620 students attending six secondary schools in South-East Queensland, Australia. The schools consisted of two coeducational state schools, two single-sex non-Church independent schools, and two single-sex Catholic schools. Thirty-five of the items used for the questionnaire were developed from Kohn and Frazer's (cited in Burnett and Fanshawe, 1996) Academic Stress Scale and thirty-three came from Strutynski's (cited in Burnett and Fanshawe, 1996) list of the most frequently named problems of 2336 Australian high school students. The items from Kohn and Frazer's questionnaire had to be modified to make them meaningful

to Australian students. The students had to respond to the items by using a rating continuum of 1-7 in which 1 means no problem at all and 7 indicates a very big problem in answer to the question "to what extent is each a problem for you?" The assumption was that having a problem is a stressor and having a big problem meant it was possible that it contributed to feelings of distress in the subject. The outcomes of all the studies reviewed indicate that school stress is the most significant in all students' lives.

#### ***2.2.2.2 Relationships and stress***

Wenz-Gross and Siperstein (1997) explain that in the social sphere, the peer network becomes larger and more fluctuating. Relationships with peers intensify and have greater significance in the definition of the self. Therefore pressures from peers to do certain things or behave in a particular way can have a profound influence on healthy and unhealthy behaviours. In the middle school, relationships with teachers are more negative as students view teachers with distrust and the teacher is often seen as controlling and whose sole aim is to discipline, at a time when adolescents are striving for autonomy and personal choice. Wenz-Gross and Siperstein (1997) state that the way adolescents deal with these issues would depend on their developmental level and the goals and domains threatened by the events. They however, point out that very few studies have focused on the different areas of stress throughout the middle school years. This makes it difficult to generalise their findings. Compaq and Wagner (cited in Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1997) confirm the above point when their study revealed that different types of stress have different effects on adjustment.

Adolescents develop within systems (Bronfenbrenner; Bertalanffy, cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 2000), therefore their functioning may be influenced by individual attributes as well as by relationships within families. Specifically conflict with parents is likely to increase during adolescence. Hendron (1990) explained adolescence as a life stage during which physical, psychological and social influences come to bear upon the individual. The adolescent's functioning is therefore influenced not only by individual attributes, but also by relationships within their families (Lohman and Jarvis, 1998). Then there is the process of developing new relationships with families, peers, the school, and the culture that surrounds them. While the majority of the adolescents will cope very well, there will be those who will suffer stress-related disorders. The expression of these disorders is often related to social pressures placed on the adolescent. Stress may be expressed in depression, eating disorders, or substance abuse.

Hendron (1990) supports the views of psychoanalytical theorists such as Blos and Freud (cited in Arnold, 1990) who argue that adolescence is a period of internal intrapsychic struggle between dependence and independence and autonomy. Piaget (cited in Hendron, 1990) also has a similar view in that he sees adolescence as a period of utilising new cognitive abilities in the stage of operational thinking and if difficulties in doing this successfully may lead to stress. Piaget states that formal operational thought may cause the adolescent to concentrate more on the possibilities than on realities. This may lead to confusion. Erikson (cited in Lefton, 1994) provides a clear picture of this

confusion. Elkind (1968) states that unrestrained theorising about ideals without complete understanding of the reality, tends to lead adolescents to rebellion and little patience for adults, including parents, who do not provide quick solutions to personal, social, and other problems. Elkind also suggests that adolescents become introspective and the strong tendency to analyse oneself is projected onto others. The adolescent becomes self-conscious and takes others' point of view to the extreme. This explains why the peer group is so important during the high school years. Stress related to these issues is not an uncommon factor.

#### ***2.2.2.3 Adolescence and identity formation***

Erikson (cited in Lefton, 1994) provided a basic framework for understanding the needs of adolescents in relation to the society in which they grow, learn, and later make a contribution. His view is similar to that of Piaget in that he saw development taking place in stages. Each of these stages has its own particular goals, achievements, problems, and dangers. Erikson sees the Middle School years as a crisis stage where there is industry versus inferiority. The school and neighbourhood offer new challenges in addition to those encountered in the home. Interaction with peers has increasing significance and the adolescent's ability to move between these different worlds and cope with academic demands, friends, and activities either lead to psychological growth or feelings of inferiority. The main focus of the adolescent in this stage is the search for identity. According to Erikson, there is conflict between identity versus confusion. If the adolescent fails to integrate the various aspects of his

life or cannot make any choice, he is bound to be threatened by confusion. In the middle of all of this, says Erikson, the adolescent also experiences what he calls a moratorium. This means that the adolescent delays making a commitment to personal and occupational choices. The sum result of all of this is that the adolescent becomes stressed because it is difficult to handle so many issues at once or the adolescent does not know how to deal with these issues.

Linn & Zippa (1984) say that personality variables may influence the individual's vulnerability to stress. Beck (1976) on another angle saw problematic patterns as being the reason for depression, anger or anxiety. This is especially evident for instance when the adolescent sets unrealistic goals and the attempts to achieve the goals are self defeating. It is not the actual demand or capability that leads to stress, but the perception of the demand or ability to deal with it (Cox & MacKay, 1976).

#### ***2.2.2.4 Situational factors mediating stress***

It is clear that there is agreement on the existence of stress. However, there seem to be some differences in what situations may cause the most stress. In reviewing literature, school stress appears an important area of concern in almost all the studies. Parental illness, unemployment, socio-economic status and marital discord between parents have been cited as some of the sources of adolescent stress. Social changes such as the move from primary to high school can be traumatic for adolescents. Gillock and Reyes (1997) did a study with 158 urban, low-income, Mexican-American high school sophomores.

The sample was obtained from the sophomore (10<sup>th</sup> grade) class in an inner-city public high school. The school was found in a low-income largely Mexican-American neighbourhood and the school environment was a reflection of the community in which the school was located. As the sample was almost all of Latino origin, English proficiency was limited. The school had a population of 2000 students and reported high dropout (55%) and mobility (23%) rates that suggests constant changes in enrolment. Using structured interviews initially developed by Kyle(1984) and modified by Reyes and Jason (cited in Gillock and Reyes, 1997) they conducted a fifty-minute interview with the students on the playground on factors associated with risk for dropouts from school. The interview was conducted on a one-to-one basis. Stress was measured using a checklist of the following items: Personal issues and events directly affecting the individual, Family issues involving parents, siblings and arrangements in the home, peer issues involving relationships with friends, and school issues affecting academic performance. The report revealed that the students' resource- poor communities were responsible for the most severe stressors. Generally both males and females reported equal number of stressors, but gender differences were observed in the kinds of stressors reported. It is understandable therefore that some adolescents experience problems in adjusting in this phase of the school lives, especially if they are already experiencing some prior difficulties. Gillock & Reyes (1997) support the view that major life events such as relocation and changing schools function additively to increase stress. According to Gillock and Reyes low-income and minority adolescents' high failure rate may be explained partly by their increased exposure to stressors as

a result of disadvantaged circumstances. Stressors such as conflict, racism, violence, and poverty are significantly higher in these areas.

Wens-Gross and Siperstein (1997) studied urban, low-income, Mexican-American adolescents and found that levels of stress were linked to both adolescents' risk for school failure and ethnic and socio-economic disadvantage. Also socio-economic disadvantage and stress can become cyclic and additive. Munsch and Wampler (cited in Gillock & Reyes, 1997) and Takashi and Majima (cited in Gillock & Reyes, 1997) say that high levels of stress is linked to increased risk for school failure and with ethnic and socioeconomic disadvantage. These were prevalent mainly in areas typically characterised by high rates of crime, unemployment, school dropout, teen pregnancy, and welfare dependency. School presented particular difficulties for these learners. Learning new skills, performing successfully in tests, class presentations and completion of tasks on time were found to be stressful for many of the students. Some of the aggravating factors were unclear instructions, and assignment objectives that placed a burden on adolescents. It would however, be incorrect to assume that stress is only caused by too much pressure, in fact, too little or no pressure can also be a source of stress. Boredom and a lack of stimulation are known to be very stressful for many individuals. Excess stress leads to underachievement in academic areas, lack of interest in schoolwork, absenteeism, and lowered self-esteem (Caudill & Carrington cited in Kruger, 1995). Compemole (cited in Kruger, 1995) states that in the school set-up physical aspects like crowded classrooms, too many programmes, excessive emphasis on achievement as seen in the many tests,

school anxiety and phobia, unrealistic expectations and competition are all stressful situations for adolescents. Munsch & Wampler (cited in Gillock and Reyes, 1997) state that high levels of stress have been linked both with adolescents' risk for school failure as well as with ethnic and socio-economic disadvantage.

#### ***2.2.2.5 Gender and Adolescent Stress***

Female students typically report more stressful situations and that they are affected more by the situations than the male students (Newcomb, Huba, and Bentler, 1996; Roecker, Dubow, and Donaldson, 1996; Stark, Spirito, Williams, and Guevremont, cited in Gillock and Reyes, 1997). It is expected then that females will make a greater effort to cope. Some researchers (e.g., Patterson & McCubbin, 1987) suggest that females are socialised into being affiliative, and thus are able to solve problems through interaction with others. Gender roles are felt more by females than males as issues such as acceptance by peers, relationships with the opposite sex, feelings of isolation, loneliness, and disagreements with parents increase. If sexual abuse takes place, the adjustment is severely hampered. As reported in the Gillock and Reyes' (1997) study males reported higher levels of personal stress and females reported stress related to lack of resources. Females were more affected by developmentally related stress of adolescence. Males were more likely to be affected by peer pressure and can get into trouble with the law, at school they disliked their classes, get into trouble with their teachers, get suspended and fail their grades. Females, on the other hand reported greater domestic

responsibilities and conflict with their parents. Female stress is linked more to socially expected and interpersonal issues.

#### *2.2.2.6 Stressful life events in adolescence*

Unger (2001) carried out a study of stressful life events amongst adolescents in Wuhan, China and the associations between stress and adolescent smoking, alcohol use, and depressive symptoms. The participants were 205 seventh-grade students in four schools in Wuhan, China. Two of the schools were in the urban areas, one in a small town, and one in a rural area. All the participants were of Han ethnicity, which is the main ethnic group in Wuhan. A pilot study was conducted with 75 male and 74 female seventh-to ninth-grade adolescents from three classrooms in a single school in Wuhan. Their mean age was 14 years and they were from the school which also participated in the larger study. Students were asked to respond with open-ended answers to questions translated from Compas, Davis, Forsythe, and Wagner (1987). The first question measured daily hassles and uplifts. The second question measured major life events. Males reported higher levels of substance use than did the female students. 48% males and 13% females had smoked sometime in their lives. 78% male and 44% girls had tried alcohol. Several depressive symptoms were more prevalent amongst females than males. They were found to be more likely to report feeling lonely, sad, wanting to cry, or had difficulty falling asleep. The most frequently reported stressful event was failing exams, a bad class rank, a new friend, having to change seats as punishment, and getting along with classmates. Life events in order of severity were death of parent, divorce of parents, parents' drug use, family member in an accident,

and parent becoming disabled. Males showed a more significant association between stressful school situations and use of alcohol and depressive symptoms. Amongst female students, the association was between negative school-related events and smoking. Amongst females there was a higher tendency to use alcohol when faced with both positive and negative peer-related events. Lower alcohol use and smoking was associated with positive family-related events. It is clear here that stressful events are associated with alcohol use and smoking.

#### ***2.2.2.7 Stress and self-esteem***

Abouserie (1994) conducted a study of the sources and levels of stress in relation to locus of control and self esteem in college students. The sample was drawn from second-year undergraduate students from nine departments at the University of Wales College of Cardiff. The participants were made up as follows: 202 males and 473 females. There were four questionnaires employed on Academic stress, Life stress, Locus of control, and Self Esteem Scale. On the academic stress questionnaire the most significant stressful items reported were examinations and results, studying for examinations, and too much to do. The majority of the students fell into the moderate range of life stress, with just 10.4% reporting serious life stress. The stress in relation to locus of control and self esteem questionnaire revealed that students who believed control was from the external sources were more stressed than who had internal control. Students with high self esteem showed lower levels of stress than those with low self esteem. Female students appeared to be more prone to stress overall than are male students. This study supports Wenz-

known to contribute to academic failure, unemployment, health problems, underachievement, and non-completion of work assignments.

Kruger (1995) found that there was such a vast amount of literature on stress that it needed to be categorised. She looked at the identification and prevention of stress with the aim of providing structure for studying the large body of stress. In her study of literature, she classified stress according to the source at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. The micro-level dealt with issues such as appearance and loneliness. The meso-level involved relationships with the family, peers, and teachers. The macro-level includes issues outside the micro- and meso-levels with political issues being one of them. Kruger argued that South Africa is undergoing unparalleled changes particularly in the political and social arenas. This is because of the change in the structure of the government and the people of different cultures mixing at all levels of society. The increase in crime, psychological disorders, heart attacks, and other stress-related conditions define the pace at which change is taking place. Therefore stress is not uncommon in a society like South Africa. The adolescent is especially vulnerable in the physical, intellectual, political, social, and affective areas. Adolescents are found to be afraid of rejection, ostracism, and differences with peers. At the same time they are striving for independence, self-identity, and personal values. This sometimes brings them into conflict with authority and also creates internal conflict.

### 2.2. 3. Coping Strategies and Support

One attribute of adolescents that may contribute to their psychological and behavioural problems or absence thereof, is their ability to cope with stress. Different types of coping strategies were found to mediate the impact of stressful situations on the individual's indicators of functioning (Stern and Zevon; Compas, cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998). Coping with stress is a complex, transactional process that changes according to personal assessments and situational pressures. It involves active cognitive and behavioural efforts by the person affected (Folkman and Lazarus, cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998). Folkman and Lazarus also see it as a process that changes according to the nature of the stressful situation over time. Coping is thus defined as a "process of managing demands (external or internal) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person" (Lazarus and Folkman, cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998). Folkman & Lazarus (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998) identified two general types of coping, namely problem-focused coping where coping involves doing something to solve the problem, and emotion-focused coping which involves managing or reducing the emotional source of stress. Phelps and Jarvis (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998) discovered four ways of coping:

- active coping- strategize and utilise instrumental support.
- Avoidant coping- deny the occurrence or impact of the event or escape by use of drugs or alcohol.
- emotion-focused coping- includes release of emotion
- acceptance coping- the individual removes himself psychologically from the situation or attempts redefining the event.

Children and adolescents use social support to help them cope with stress and to adjust to their changing environment (Compaq, Slavin, Wagner, & Vannatta; Hirsch & DuBois, cited in Wenz-Gross and Siperstein, 1997). Greater social support has been linked to better adjustment during the change over from primary to middle school. This means that the students who get support from their family and teachers during their transition from primary to secondary school show fewer signs of stress. Having social support meant they also presented fewer symptoms of depression, somatisation, and other negative symptoms as older adolescents (Compaq et al, 1986). A warm family context is related to healthy psychological growth during adolescence.

Family continues to be a core source of strength (Gillock and Reyes, 1998), however, although the adolescents in the low-income Mexican-American group reported that their families were very supportive, this did not seem to be enough to prevent stress-related problems related to academic performance. In fact Blechman; Hill and Sandfort; and Reyes and Jason (cited in Gillock & Reyes, 1997) found that families in disadvantaged communities did not have the ability to counteract the negative effects of stress as they themselves struggle with the same disadvantages as their adolescent children. Chronic unemployment, lack of resources, marital disruption, single parent-households, all affect the family functioning. Parents in these areas are more restrictive and punitive towards their children mainly to protect them from the high-risk environment. The quality and constitution of the family climate are linked to the type of coping strategies the adolescents would employ.

Shulman (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998) studied differences in coping strategies by Israelite adolescents with relation to family environment and found similar situations to the American family situations cited in the Gillock and Reyes study. Seiffge-Krenke (1995) theorised that emotional support, coping strategies, modeling, and family climates are linked to coping processes, coping structures, and functional and dysfunctional coping strategies in adolescence. Seiffge-Krenke (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998) replicated the Shulman study with a sample of Scandinavian adolescents and found that they too reported situations similar to those in the Israelite study. Past research indicates that if adolescents have a family environment which is warm, caring, communicative, understanding, and supportive, it generally diminishes the negative influences of stressors on health (Gillock & Reyes, 1997). Walker & Greene (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998) studied 123 11-19 year old adolescents at an outpatient medical centre and found that a stronger predictor of adolescent health than negative life events experienced is the level of family cohesion the adolescent perceived. An earlier study by Hauser (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998) revealed a relationship between stressors caused by chronic illness such as diabetes and a key psychological environment namely the family. The family consistently plays the key role in lessening the negative effects of stress, provided it has cohesion, warmth, and stability. On the other hand, families which are characterised by low cohesion, poor organisation, high conflict, and low expressiveness also show dysfunctional coping mechanisms.

Strong social support is a key stress-buffering psychosocial resource that mediates the relationship between stress and adjustment (Cutrona & Russel, 1990). In a review of literature on social support in adulthood Cutrona & Russel, 1990) found that for stressors that threaten a person's sense of competence, emotional support from certain key individuals such as peers was important. Gore and Aseltine (1995) state that in older adolescents, the effects of peer stress is buffered by social integration (companionship from peers). Adolescents who feel accepted and are part of social groups are less likely to present high levels of stress. Schools in low-income urban areas also generally lack resources to meet the needs of students. Causey and Dubow; Munsch and Wampler (cited in Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1997) find that the high number of low-income group students and teacher-student ratios makes it difficult for the school to provide the necessary attention and support the students require. They also found that urban, low-income group students moving into high school reported increasingly more negative perceptions of support from schools compared with increasing numbers of daily stressors. The students reported that the school personnel offered them little support to deal with the increasing school stress. In the Causey, et al study both males and females reported less support from teachers in situations of high chronic stress which in turn related to poorer academic achievement. In addition, chronic stress may be intensified rather than buffered by relationships with teachers. Many students had general difficulties with teachers including being out of favour with teachers and feeling ignored. The design of this study necessarily limits the generalisability of the findings. Griffith, Dubow, and Ippolito (1998) investigated developmental and cross-situational differences in adolescents'

coping strategies with regard to family, school, and peer stressors. The sample was 148 seventh grade students, 124 ninth-graders, and 103 twelfth grade students (375). The students were of Caucasian American, Hispanic, and African American origin. The instrument had 29 approach-coping items and 16 avoidance coping items. the respondents had to rate items on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree =1 – strongly agree = 5). African American students reported higher incidence of approach coping than Caucasian students, but Hispanic students did not differ from African American or Caucasian students on approach coping. African American students also reported higher levels of avoidance coping than the other groups. Females reported using approach coping in response to all three stressors. Females also reported feeling more upset by each of the three stressors. Guinn and Vincent ( 2002) examined relationships among perceived stress, self esteem, acculturation, and gender with coping response of 472 Mexican American adolescents aged 14 to 16 years. The subjects were drawn from the predominantly Mexican American population of Lower Rio Grande Valley region of Texas. A self report questionnaire was used to obtain data on perceived stress and coping response. The subjects were asked to rate on a four point scale to what degree they agreed with each statement on how they viewed and/or dealt with stressful situations. High perceived stress was reported by the students. Acculturation scores were not very high and self esteem was moderate and showed no significant gender differences. Self esteem best predicted coping response. This means that adolescents with high self esteem handled stress better than those with low self esteem. Holahan (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998) modeled the relationship among parental support, adaptive coping strategies,

and psychological adjustment among 241 18 year old college students. High supportiveness and low conflict with both parents was associated with the use of adaptive coping strategies and lower psychological distress. The quality and constitution of the family climate was also strongly associated with the type of adaptive coping strategies.

The studies on coping are mostly carried out among American students where the samples are mostly African American, Caucasian American, and Latin American. It would be interesting to see whether these studies would produce similar results in African countries.

#### ***2.2.4 Concluding comments***

This chapter served to provide insight into current perspectives on adolescence stress, and associated factors including self-esteem and depression. In addition, it examined research on coping strategies used by adolescence to deal with stress.

In order to contribute to the body of international literature reviewed in this chapter, and to the limited research in South Africa on this issue, the present study examined the perceptions of grade 11 students at a secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal on key stressors in their lives, and the coping strategies they use.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### AND DESIGN OF STUDY

*the different course*

#### 3.1 Locating the study

This study is located in the interpretivist paradigm. The aim of the study was to understand and make sense of the feelings, experiences, and social influences in the social lives of the subjects, and how these factors mediate one another (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The aim is not to explain the cause/s of stress in the subjects. The interpretivist paradigm aims to understand the subjective world of human experience (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000, p.22). The interpretivists focus on action. An action only becomes meaningful when we understand the intentions. Glaser and Strauss (cited in Cohen, Manion, & Morrison) states that interpretive researchers set out to understand the subjects interpretations of the world around them. Theory emerges from particular situations and is grounded on data generated by the research.

#### 3.2 Critical Questions:

The following are the critical questions that were explored:

- What are grade 11 learners' perception of key stressors in their lives?
- What coping strategies do grade 11 learners employ to deal with stress?
- Are there any gender differences in levels of stress and the kinds of coping strategies employed by learners?
- What is the relationship between stress and the variable, self-esteem, and stress and the variable, depression with respect to the grade 11 learners?

### 3.3 Context of Study

This study was conducted at a secondary school in Kwazulu-Natal in November 2002 - a co-educational, public school with a population of 1183 learners. The majority of the learners are Indians, with African and Coloured learners making up about 30% of the total population. The learners reside in Isipingo, Umlazi, Malakazi, Folweni, and KwaMakutha and their backgrounds range from lower to upper middle class socio-economic groups. As an educator at the school, the researcher has known the subjects since their entry into the school in grade 8, and has developed a good relationship with the majority of the subjects. The school was formerly an all Indian school, and had to deal with the many changes brought about by the new multicultural education system. These challenges obviously were stressful for both the learners and educators, and are still felt by many of the learners and educators. As a so-called privileged school, Isipingo Secondary receives the minimum subsidy from the department of education. The school fees for the current year is set at R500. Non-payment of fees is a matter of concern as many of learners from low income families cannot afford this, and this impacts on the effective running of the school. A limited number of governing body appointed educators are employed to assist the over-burdened educators but it has not been enough to enable educators give the learners the support they require in situations of need. Shortage of textbooks also places a strain on the effective teaching and learning at the school.

Many of the learners are under pressure to achieve academically. These learners often complain to educators that there is too much stress in their lives. The school has no pastoral care policy to deal with learner problems. Guidance periods are used to teach other subjects. Sporting and other extra-curricular activities do not receive sufficient attention in the curriculum. There appears to be very few studies done in South Africa on the subject of school stress, especially in the post apartheid era when many changes are taking place at a rapid pace. Learner composition at schools has undergone a complete change with learners of different languages and cultures having to learn side by side. At the same time the curriculum has been subject to rapid changes sometimes not allowing for educators to adjust or retrain. Although this study focuses only on grade 11 learners, the change affects all learners. This secondary school has 261 grade 11 learners: 147 female, and 114 male learners. Of these 31 are African learners. The perception of educators in the school is that grade 11 learners experience a great deal of academic stress in view of the fact that the grade 11 grades are used as a basis for initial application to tertiary institutions.

150 Grade 11 learners were selected according to a stratified random sample taking into account gender (75 male and 75 female learners). 15 male and 15 female learners were selected by allocating a number to each learner in each of the 5 grade 11 classes.

### **3.4 Research Methods**

The data gathering tool was a self-report questionnaire in the form of a rating scale. A questionnaire is a useful instrument for collecting survey information. It provides structured, often numerical data and does not require the researcher to be present when it is administered. It is also comparatively easy to administer and analyse (Wilson, & McLean, 1994). It was borne in mind that the responses may not be totally honest.

The questions in the questionnaires were designed with the key research questions in mind. There were 3 questionnaires: stress and depression, coping strategies, and self-esteem questionnaires. In the stress and depression and coping strategies questionnaires, the respondents had to rate responses according to a four point scale by placing a tick in the block of their choice. In the self-esteem questionnaire, the respondents had to circle the response of their choice.

The stress questionnaire aimed at exploring key stressors in the lives of the learners (refer to appendix). The 28 questions were in random order, but were structured on the following dimensions: seven items each on family, peer, academic, and life stress.

The items on the questionnaire were drawn from the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (refer to appendix) and adapted to make them more meaningful for the current study. Included in the questionnaire were seven items on depression. The respondents had to rate each statement on a four point Likert

scale according to how much it applied to them by ticking the column under the following: not at all, sometimes, often, or all the time.

In the coping strategies questionnaire (refer to appendix) the aim was to explore which coping strategies the participants accessed and how often they accessed them. The coping strategy scale included the following strategies: I eat a lot, I exercise, I take a tablet or medicine, I talk to my friends, I talk to my parents, I think positive thoughts, I turn to religion. The subjects had to similarly rate each of the seven statements by placing a tick in one of the following columns: not at all, sometimes, often, or all the time.

With the self-esteem questionnaire (refer to appendix) the researcher hoped to get some indication of the subjects' level of self-esteem. There were seven statements about the general feelings the participants had about themselves. The items were drawn from the Rosenberg Scale of Self-Esteem, developed by Dr. Rosenberg, Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland. The items were modified to suit the aims of the current study. For each statement they had to circle one of the following responses: strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

### **3.5 Research Procedure**

The questionnaire was piloted with 6 randomly selected participants (3 male and 3 female subjects). Minimal adjustments needed to be made on the basis of the responses of subjects.

The researcher employed the assistance of five educators who administered the questionnaire during a common guidance period. The purpose and procedure was explained to them before they administered the questionnaire. Each item on the questionnaire was also discussed so as to facilitate the process in the class. They in turn explained it to the subjects. The participants had to complete the questionnaire within 20 minutes.

Two minor problems were encountered. One of them was that one of the educators administering the questionnaire did not collect the Questionnaires separately as there was no provision made for indicating gender on the questionnaire. These had to be discarded and a new group was then given questionnaires to complete.

### **3.6 Ethical Issues**

No names were indicated on the questionnaires and the learners were assured confidentiality and anonymity. All subjects' participation was totally voluntary. The nature and purpose of the survey was explained to them and informed consent was obtained before the questionnaire was administered.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Introduction:**

To achieve the aims of the study, the data are analysed in different ways: first to examine the severity of the causes of stress of stress by item and gender differences. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) are used to quantify student responses to each of the items on the stress questionnaire. The mean score values represent the average Likert response across statements. These results examine the first research question in this study: What are grade 11 learners perceptions of key stressors in their lives?

Secondly, correlation analysis was used to examine separately the relationship between perceived stress and self-esteem on the one hand, and perceived stress and depression on the other.

Thirdly, an analysis of data on coping strategies used by the learners is provided in the form of bar graphs by gender.

### **4.2 Perceived Sources of Stress**

Data on perceived sources of stress with respect to the total sample ( $n = 150$ ) is provided in Table 1. Students found that the most stressful factors related to life stresses and academic stress. With respect to life stress, the following factors caused students the most stress: fear of being a victim of crime or violence, fear of losing a loved one, being prone to over-react to things, fear of not finding a job upon leaving school. The most stressful factors is fear of losing a loved one ( $M=1.97$ ). With regard to academic stress, the factors that were the main sources

of stress to female students are: the fact that there is too much schoolwork, being nervous to speak in front of the class, the worry that they may not pass grade 11. The most stressful academic factor is having too much schoolwork to complete (M = 1.85).

Students do not perceive factors associated with peer stress and family stress as strong sources of stress.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for sources of stress amongst grade 11 students (n=150).**

| <b>Life Stress</b>   | <b>Mean</b> | <b>SD</b> |
|--|-------------|-----------|
| 1. I fear being a victim of crime or violence.               | 1.45        | .994      |
| 2. I find it difficult to work up the energy to do things.   | .91         | .745      |
| 3. I tend to over-react to things.                           | 1.17        | .878      |
| 4. I fear contracting serious illness.                       | .92         | .973      |
| 5. I fear losing a loved one                                 | 1.97        | 1.05      |
| 6. I fear that I will not find a job when I leave school.    | 1.26        | 1.0217    |
| 7. I fear that my parents will be unemployed.                | .75         | .962      |
| <b>Peer Stress</b>   |             |           |
| 1. My friends force me to drink/take drugs                   | .19         | .642      |
| 2. My friends tease me about my looks.                       | .32         | .594      |
| 3. My friends pressure me to have a boyfriend/girlfriend.    | .35         | .768      |
| 4. My friends do not value my opinions.                      | .42         | .648      |
| 5. I do not get along with my friends.                       | .34         | .633      |
| 6. I find it difficult to make friends.                      | .37         | .670      |
| 7. My friends tell me what to do.                            | .28         | .507      |
| <b>Academic Stress</b>                                       |             |           |
| 1. There is too much schoolwork.                             | 1.85        | .880      |
| 2. I get nervous when I have to speak in front of the class. | 1.42        | 1.00      |
| 3. I worry that I will not pass.                             | 1.54        | 1.07      |
| 4. My friends copy my homework.                              | .89         | .88       |
| 5. I am unhappy at school.                                   | .67         | .87       |
| 6. I do not like my teachers.                                | .77         | .75       |
| 7. I become sick before going to school.                     | .40         | .685      |

### Family Stress

|  |     |      |
|--|-----|------|
| 1. My parents drink or use drugs.                | .21 | .547 |
| 2. My parents are separating/ getting a divorce. | .34 | .873 |
| 3. My parents do not like my friends.            | .42 | .717 |
| 4. I have too many chores at home.               | .50 | .775 |
| 5. My parents do not trust me.                   | .59 | .743 |
| 6. My parents fight.                             | .61 | .827 |
| 7. I have to take care of my brothers/sisters.   | .65 | .905 |

Male students mean responses are provided in Table 2. In a similar pattern, male students reported the greatest sources of stress related to life stresses and academic stress. The key life stresses are: fear of being a victim of crime or violence, fear of losing a loved one, being prone to over-react to things, fear of not finding a job upon leaving school, and fear of contracting a serious illness. For male students, the most stressful life factor is fear of losing a loved one ( $M=2.20$ ).

The academic factors that are perceived to be most stressful are: too much schoolwork, being nervous to speak in front of the class, the worry that they may not pass grade 11, and friends copy their homework. The most stressful academic factor seems to be the fear of not passing grade 11 ( $M=1.84$ ).

With respect to peer stress, male students reported that the fact that their friends do not value their opinion is the main source of stress. An interesting finding is that male students responses indicate that under family stresses, the fact that they have to take care of their brothers and sisters was the main source of stress for them.

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics for sources of stress amongst grade 11 male students (n = 75).**

| <b>Life Stress</b>   | <b>Mean</b> | <b>SD</b> |
|--|-------------|-----------|
| 1. I fear being a victim of crime or violence.               | 1.40        | 1.05      |
| 2. I find it difficult to work up the energy to do things.   | .85         | .766      |
| 3. I tend to over-react to things.                           | 1.27        | 1.00      |
| 4. I fear contracting serious illness.                       | 1.00        | .973      |
| 5. I fear losing a loved one                                 | 2.20        | 1.01      |
| 6. I fear that I will not find a job when I leave school.    | 1.45        | 1.06      |
| 7. I fear that my parents will be unemployed.                | .97         | 1.01      |
| <b>Peer Stress</b>   |             |           |
| 1. My friends force me to drink/take drugs.                  | .27         | .777      |
| 2. My friends tease me about my looks.                       | .36         | .650      |
| 3. My friends pressure me to have a boyfriend/girlfriend.    | .55         | .949      |
| 4. My friends do not value my opinions.                      | .45         | .664      |
| 5. I do not get along with my friends.                       | .33         | .684      |
| 6. I find it difficult to make friends.                      | .39         | .695      |
| 7. My friends tell me what to do.                            | .40         | .596      |
| <b>Academic Stress</b>                                       |             |           |
| 1. There is too much schoolwork.                             | 1.73        | .569      |
| 2. I get nervous when I have to speak in front of the class. | 1.35        | .937      |
| 3. I worry that I will not pass.                             | 1.84        | 1.03      |
| 4. My friends copy my homework.                              | 1.12        | 1.01      |
| 5. I am unhappy at school.                                   | .63         | .882      |
| 6. I do not like my teachers.                                | .67         | .777      |
| 7. I become sick before going to school.                     | .43         | .701      |
| <b>Family Stress</b>   |             |           |
| 1. My parents drink or use drugs.                            | .19         | .512      |
| 2. My parents are separating/ getting a divorce.             | .51         | 1.02      |
| 3. My parents do not like my friends.                        | .43         | .701      |
| 4. I have too many chores at home.                           | .71         | .882      |
| 5. My parents do not trust me.                               | .64         | .765      |
| 6. My parents fight.   | .69         | .986      |
| 7. I have to take care of my brothers/sisters.               | .85         | 1.01      |

Table 3 shows the means the female students' (n= 75) ratings for each item in terms of the degree of stress associated with it. It can thus be concluded that life stress and academic related activities are the most potent causes of stress in students. With the respect to life stress, the following factors caused students the

most stress: fear of being a victim of crime or violence, fear of losing a loved one, being prone to over-react to things, fear of not finding a job upon leaving school. The greatest fear appears to be related to losing a loved one (M= 1.75).

With regard to academic stress, the factors that were the main sources of stress to female students are: the fact that there is too much schoolwork, being nervous to speak in front of the class, the worry that they may not pass grade 11. The most stressful academic factors seems to be having too much homework to complete (M=1.96).

In examining family factors, female students perceived as most stressful the fact that parents do not trust them, and with regard to peer stresses females found the fact that friends do not value their opinions as the main source of stress.

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics for sources of stress amongst grade 11 female students (n=75).**

| <b>Life Stress</b>   | <b>Mean</b> | <b>SD</b> |
|--|-------------|-----------|
| 1. I fear being a victim of crime or violence.             | 1.51        | .935      |
| 2. I find it difficult to work up the energy to do things. | .96         | .725      |
| 3. I tend to over-react to things.                         | 1.07        | .723      |
| 4. I fear contracting serious illness.                     | .84         | .973      |
| 5. I fear losing a loved one                               | 1.75        | 1.05      |
| 6. I fear that I will not find a job when I leave school.  | 1.07        | .949      |
| 7. I fear that my parents will be unemployed.              | .53         | .859      |

### Peer Stress

|   |     |      |
|---|-----|------|
| 1. My friends force me to drink/take drugs.               | .12 | .464 |
| 2. My friends tease me about my looks.                    | .28 | .534 |
| 3. My friends pressure me to have a boyfriend/girlfriend. | .15 | .456 |
| 4. My friends do not value my opinions.                   | .39 | .634 |
| 5. I do not get along with my friends.                    | .35 | .58  |
| 6. I find it difficult to make friends.                   | .35 | .647 |
| 7. My friends tell me what to do.                         | .16 | .404 |

### Academic Stress

|  |      |      |
|--|------|------|
| 1. There is too much schoolwork.                             | 1.96 | .907 |
| 2. I get nervous when I have to speak in front of the class. | 1.49 | 1.07 |
| 3. I worry that I will not pass.                             | 1.24 | 1.04 |
| 4. My friends copy my homework.                              | .65  | .647 |
| 5. I am unhappy at school.                                   | .71  | .866 |
| 6. I do not like my teachers.                                | .88  | .716 |
| 7. I become sick before going to school.                     | .37  | .673 |

### Family Stress

|  |     |      |
|--|-----|------|
| 1. My parents drink or use drugs.                | .23 | .583 |
| 2. My parents are separating/ getting a divorce. | .17 | .665 |
| 3. My parents do not like my friends.            | .41 | .737 |
| 4. I have too many chores at home.               | .29 | .588 |
| 5. My parents do not trust me.                   | .55 | .722 |
| 6. My parents fight.                             | .52 | .623 |
| 7. I have to take care of my brothers/sisters.   | .45 | .741 |

A number of significant findings are revealed about the key stressors in the lives of these grade 11 students. Results show that students are affected by many stressors related directly to their studies. This compares with the findings of Elias (1989) and West cited in Burnett & Furnshawe (1996) reported in chapter two. However, Phelps & Jarvis (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1999) found that parental and peer conflicts were significantly associated with adolescent stress. In the present study, the adolescents did not perceive factors related to family and peers to be major causes of stress in their lives.

However, present results also indicate that life stresses such as fear of being a victim of crime or violence, fear of losing a loved one, being prone to over-react to things, fear of not finding a job upon leaving school, are also important sources of stress to both males and female students. However, male students also rated highly the fear of contracting a serious illness.

#### **4.3 Relationship between Stress and Self-esteem**

To establish whether there is any relationship between perceived stress and self-esteem correlation coefficients were explored. For the total sample, findings show a significant negative correlation between stress and self-esteem ( $r = -.456$ ,  $p = .01$ ). A similar pattern was evident for male students ( $r = -.395$ ,  $p = .01$ ), and for females ( $r = -.522$ ,  $p = .01$ ). In other words, students who reported high levels of stress have low self-esteem and vice versa. Although these correlations are not large, the analysis indicates that they did not occur by chance. Abouserie (1994) reported similar findings in a study with college students. Students with high self-esteem displayed lower levels of stress than students with low self-esteem.

#### **4.4 Relationship between Stress and Depression**

In order to establish whether there is any relationship between perceived stress and depression, correlation coefficients were explored. Results revealed that for the total sample there is a significant positive correlation between perceived stress and depression ( $r = .549$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Similarly, for female students, there is a significant positive correlation between stress and depression, and for male students ( $r = .515$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Students who reported high levels of perceived stress were also the students who rated themselves highly on items such as, "I feel that

life is meaningless”, “I feel that I am not worth much as a person” on the depression scale.

Although these correlations are not large, the results of the statistical analysis indicate that they did not occur by chance.

#### **4.5 Coping Responses**

The use of coping strategies for dealing with stress by the adolescents in this study were also examined. The coping strategy scale included the following strategies:

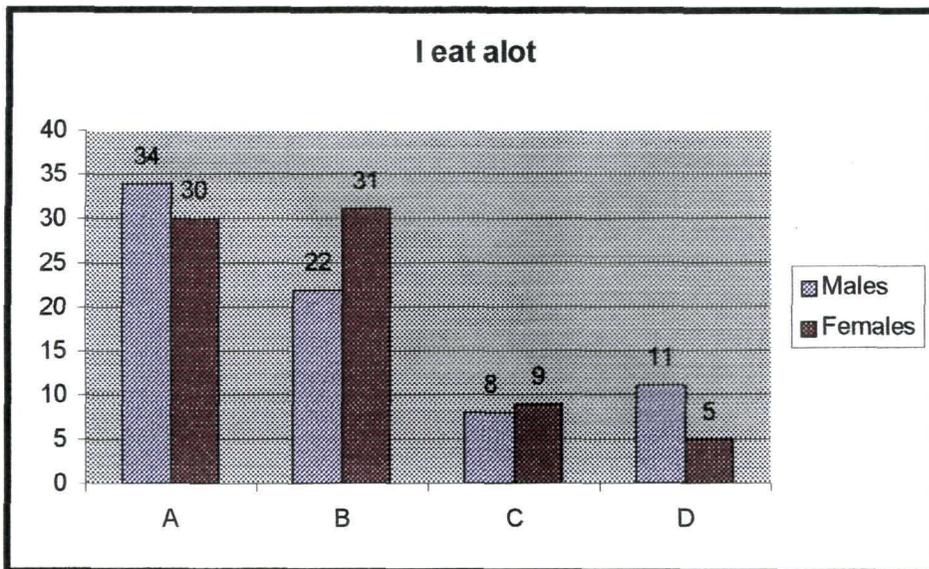
1. I eat a lot,
2. I exercise,
3. I take a tablet or medicine
4. I talk to my friends
5. I talk to my parents
6. I think positive thoughts
7. I turn to religion

The descriptive statistics in the form of frequency counts are provided in figures 1 to figure 7. Students rated each statement on the scale to indicate the extent to which they used the specific coping strategy:

- A. not at all,
- B. sometimes,
- C. often
- D. all the time.

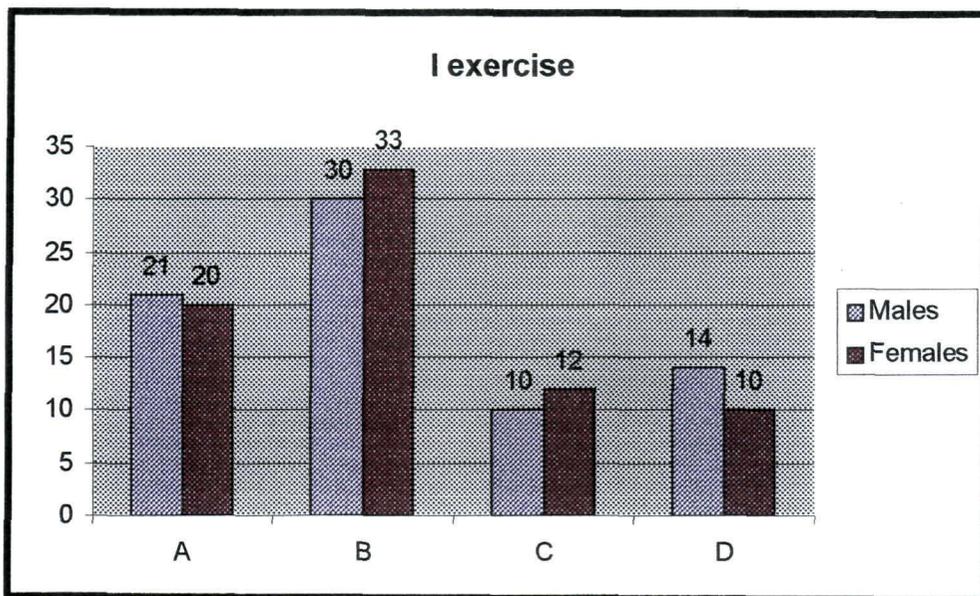
**Figure 1: Gender Differences in Coping Strategy 1**

Students reported that strategy 'I eat a lot' is very seldom used. 34 male students and 30 female students responded, "not at all". Eleven male students and 5 female students reported that they use the strategy all the time when they experience stress.



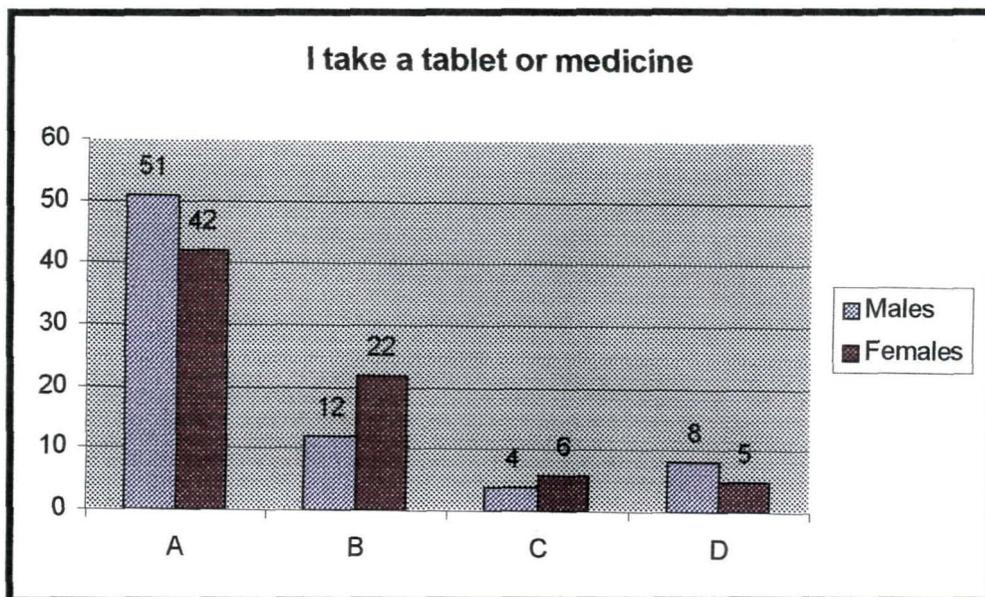
**Figure 2: Gender Differences in Coping Strategy 2**

The data revealed that exercising as a coping strategy is not used often. 104 students responded in “not at all” and “sometimes” category. 14 male students and 10 female indicated that they use this strategy all the time.



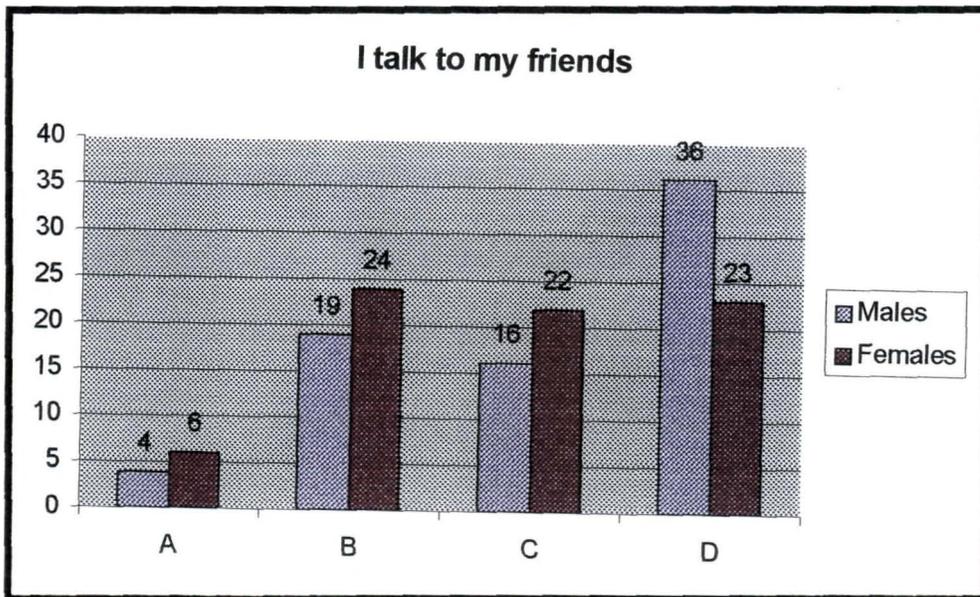
**Figure 3: Gender Differences in Coping Strategy 3**

Only 13 students responded that they use the strategy, “I take a tablet or medicine” when they are stressed. 93 students indicated that they do not use the strategy at all.



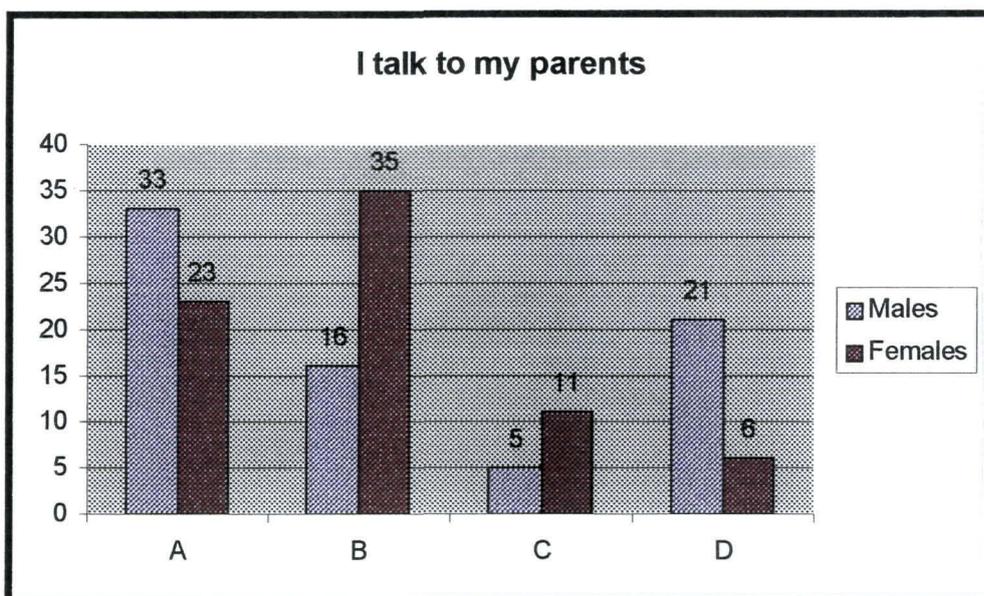
**Figure 4: Gender Differences in Coping Strategy 4**

Students were requested to indicate the extent to which they used the strategy, “I talk to my friends” when stressed. It is interesting to note that more male students (36) than female students (23) responded that they used the strategy often.



**Figure 5: Gender Differences in Coping Strategy 5**

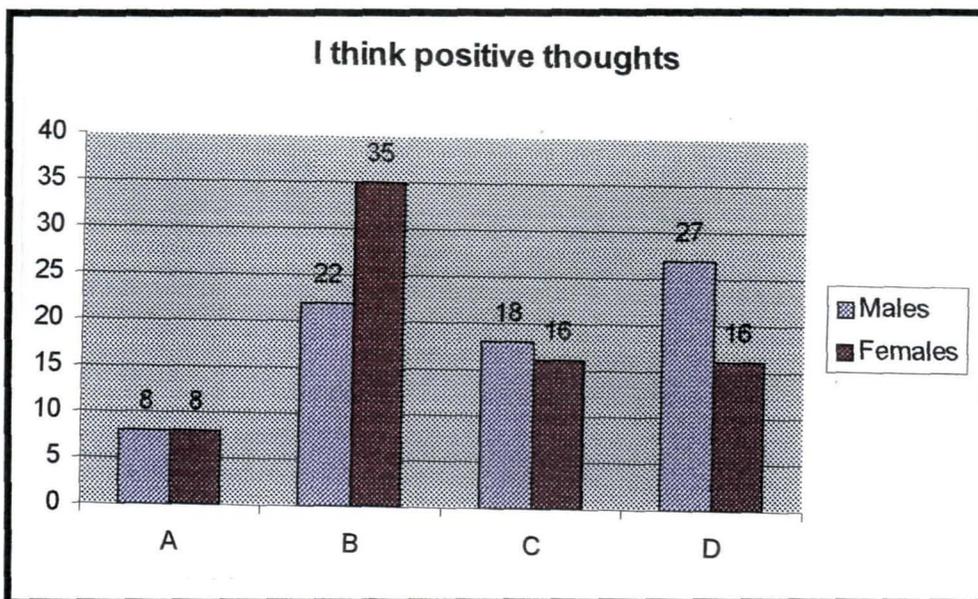
In examining the data, more males (21) than females (6) use this strategy all the time. However, this is not a strategy used often by students – 107 students responded in the “not at all” and ‘sometimes’ categories. Only 43 responded in the “all the time” and ‘often’ categories.



**Figure 6: Gender Differences in Coping Strategy 6**

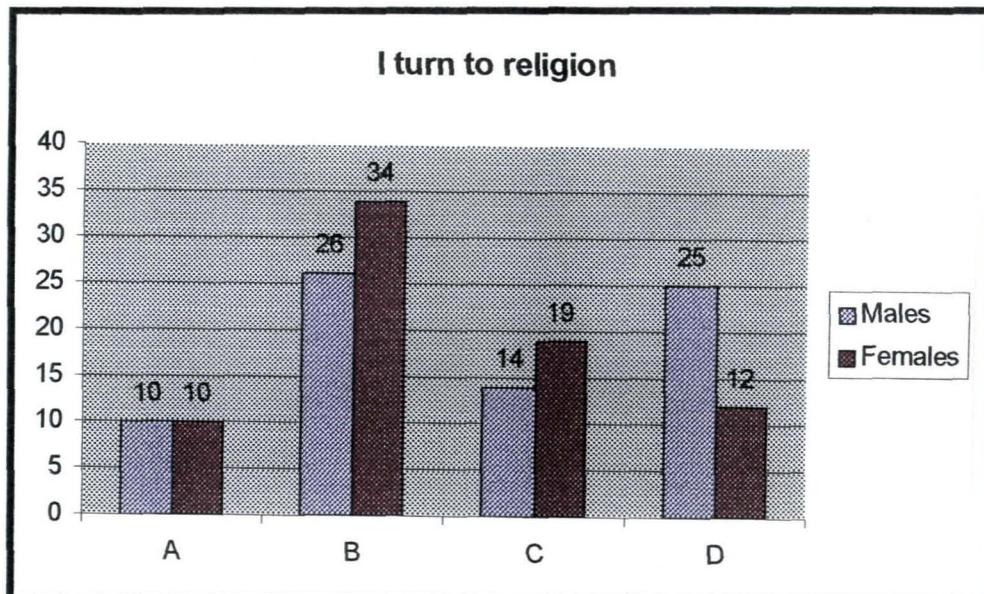
More males (27) than females (16) use this strategy all the time to cope with stress.

77 learners responded that they use this strategy 'often' and 'all the time'.



**Figure 7: Gender Differences in Coping Strategy 7**

25 males and 12 females indicated that they turn to religion all the time as a means of dealing with stressors in their lives. 130 students responded that they use the strategy either 'sometimes', 'often' and 'all the time'.



The findings on coping strategies for the total sample indicates that the most frequently used coping strategies are: talking to friends, turning to religion, and thinking positive thoughts. However, the number of students who responded in the categories ‘often’ and ‘all the time ‘ is fairly low:

“I talk to my friends” - 65% (97)

“I turn to religion” – 47% (70)

“I think positive thoughts” – 51% (77)

These would comprise active coping, that is, strategizing and using instrumental support as explained by Phelps and Jarvis (cited in Lohman & Jarvis, 1998). Two other active strategies, talking to parents and exercising are used by 29% (43) and 31% (46) of the students respectively. It is interesting to note that although students did not perceive family factors as key stressors in their lives, only 43 students talked to parents when experiencing stress. Research cited in chapter two suggests that emotional support, coping strategies and family climates are linked to coping processes, coping structures, and functional and dysfunctional coping strategies in adolescence (Seiffe- Krenke, 1995).

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study suggest that stress is prevalent amongst the group of adolescents at the secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal. The findings provide some insight into the nature of stress amongst a group of 150 grade 11 learners in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The data indicates that the most significant stresses encountered by students were associated with Life Stress and academic stress. The events that elicit academic stress for the students are: the fact that there is too much schoolwork, being nervous to speak in front of the class, and the worry that they may not pass grade 11. With respect to life stresses, the events that are most significant in the lives of the students are: fear of being a victim of crime or violence, fear of losing a loved one, being prone to over-react to things, fear of not finding a job upon leaving school. There were no significant gender differences, although male students did indicate an additional event, namely, the fear of contracting a serious illness. The study also revealed that there is a significant relationship between self-esteem and stress, and depression and stress.

While the present study provides an important contribution to the limited literature in South Africa, the generalizability is limited to a particular context. The present study exploring coping strategies, stressors and psychological health of adolescents should be replicated across age cohorts and in more diverse

contexts over time. This would allow a better understanding of personal, familial, and other contextual factors influencing these variables.

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## Appendix 1: Student Stress Questionnaire

Dear Students

Please read each statement and tick the column which indicates how much the statement applies to you. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not think too much about each statement

| Not at all | Sometimes | Often | All the time |
|------------|-----------|-------|--------------|
| 0          | 1         | 2     | 3            |

- 
- 1.. I fear being a victim of crime or violence.
  2. I find myself upset by silly things
  3. My parents drink or take drugs.
  4. There is too much schoolwork.
  5. I cannot seem to experience any positive feelings at all.
  6. I get nervous when I have to speak in front of the class
  7. My friends force me to drink/take drugs.
  8. I find it difficult to work up the energy to do things.
  9. My parents are separating/getting a divorce.
  10. I feel that life is meaningless.
  11. My friends tease me about my looks.
  12. My parents do not like my friends
  13. I worry that I will not pass.
  14. I feel that I am not worth much as a person.
  15. I tend to over-react to situations.
  16. I have too many chores at home.
  17. My friends pressure me to have a boyfriend/girlfriend.
  18. My friends copy my homework.
  19. I fear contracting serious illness.
  20. I am unhappy at school.
  21. I feel I have nothing to look forward to.
  22. My friends do not value my opinion.
  23. I do not like my teacher/s.
  24. I fear losing a loved one.
  25. My parents do not trust me.
  26. I feel sad and depressed.
  27. I do not get along with my friends.
  28. My parents fight.
  29. I feel I have lost interest in just about everything.
  30. I find it difficult to make friends.
  31. I fear that I will not find a job when I leave school.
  32. I become sick before going to school.
  33. My friends tell me what to do.
  34. I fear that my parent/s will be unemployed.
  35. I have to take care of my brother/s and sister/s.
-

## Appendix 2

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### Stress Categories included in Questionnaire

#### Life Stress

1. I fear being a victim of crime or violence.
2. I find it difficult to work up the energy to do things.
3. I tend to over-react to things.
4. I fear contracting serious illness.
5. I fear losing a loved one
6. I fear that I will not find a job when I leave school.
8. I fear that my parents will be unemployed.

#### Peer Stress

1. My friends force me to drink/take drugs.
2. My friends tease me about my looks.
3. My friends pressure me to have a boyfriend/girlfriend.
4. My friends do not value my opinions.
5. I do not get along with my friends.
6. I find it difficult to make friends.
7. My friends tell me what to do.

#### Academic Stress

1. There is too much schoolwork.
2. I get nervous when I have to speak in front of the class.
3. I worry that I will not pass.
4. My friends copy my homework.
5. I am unhappy at school.
6. I do not like my teachers.
8. I become sick before going to school.

#### Family Stress

1. My parents drink or use drugs.
2. My parents are separating/ getting a divorce.
3. My parents do not like my friends.
4. I have too many chores at home.
5. My parents do not trust me.
6. My parents fight.
7. I have to take care of my brothers/sisters

### Appendix 3

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#### Items in Depression and Self Esteem Scales

1. I find myself upset by silly things.
2. I cannot seem to experience any positive feelings at all.
3. I feel that life is meaningless.
4. I feel that I am not worth much as a person.
5. I feel I have nothing to look forward to.
6. I feel sad and depressed.
7. I feel I have lost interest in just about everything.

## Appendix 4: Self-Esteem Scale

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Dear students,

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. If you **strongly agree**, circle SA. If you **agree**, circle A. If you **disagree**, circle D. If you **strongly disagree**, circle SD.

|  | 1<br>Strongly<br>Agree | 2.<br>Agree | 3.<br>Disagree | 4.<br>Strongly<br>Disagree |
|--|------------------------|-------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| 1. I feel I have a number of good qualities.                                   | SA                     | A           | D              | SD                         |
| 2. All in all, I feel I am a failure.  | SA                     | A           | D              | SD                         |
| 3. I certainly feel useless at times.  | SA                     | A           | D              | SD                         |
| 4. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.                                   | SA                     | A           | D              | SD                         |
| 5. I wish I could have more respect for myself.                                | SA                     | A           | D              | SD                         |
| 6. I am able to do things as well as most people.                              | SA                     | A           | D              | SD                         |
| 7. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal level with others. | SA                     | A           | D              | SD                         |

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## Appendix 5: Coping Strategies

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How often do you use the following ways to help you cope with stress. For each statement place a tick in the column applicable to you.

| Not at all | Sometimes | Often | All the time |
|------------|-----------|-------|--------------|
| 0          | 1         | 2     | 3            |

1. I eat a lot
2. I exercise
3. I take a tablet or medicine
4. I talk to my friends
5. I talk to my parents
6. I think positive thoughts
7. I turn to religion

Gross and Siperstein's findings where low self esteem was associated with academic stress. Millings Monk & Mahmood (1999) carried out research into the difficulties faced by students and the contributory stressors. Two questionnaires were used. One for oral interviews and the other for written responses. The 13 open-ended oral questions required respondents to talk about university life, pre-conceived ideas about it and how different the ideas were from the actual situation, adjustments they had to make, hardships experienced, how they coped, approach to problems, and thoughts regarding themselves and future students. The written questionnaire included items on general difficulties, health and relationship problems, and possible dysfunctional coping methods. The sample was drawn from students in the professions Allied to Medicine at Queen's College, Glasgow. Half the stratified sample was male. Included in the sample were 10 males under 21 and 10 females under 21. The findings revealed that for students the major difficulties included coursework and emotional state. Nine of the ten males and females reported problems with course content, time for study, and difficulty of course. Eighty percent females and sixty percent males reported that they had emotional problems including feeling suicidal.

#### ***2.2.2.8. Concluding comments***

Millings, Monk & Mahmood (1999) argue that little research is carried out into the difficulties experienced by students in Britain and the stressors which contribute to these difficulties. It appears vital to identify stressors and assess stress levels and their consequences on mental health. Excessive stress is