STRESSORS AND COPING MECHANISMS ASSOCIATED WITH PERCEIVED STRESS IN LATINOS

Objective: To evaluate the relationship between causes of perceived stress and the coping mechanisms used by Latino adults with perceived stress.

Design, Setting, Participants: This cross-sectional survey was conducted on a convenience sample of 200 Latino adults (aged ≥18 years). They were recruited from clinics, migrant camps, community events, and churches located in Charleston, S.C. This survey included questions regarding causes of perceived stress, perceived stress (Perceived Stress Scale 10), coping mechanisms (Brief COPE), and depression (Perceived Health Questionnaire 9).

Measures: High perceived stress (PSS ≥15) was the primary outcome measure. Coping mechanisms and stressors were secondary outcomes.

Results: Most (92%) of the sample was born outside the United States, and 66% reported high perceived stress. Stressors associated with high perceived stress included discrimination (P=0.0010), lack of insurance (P=0.0193), health problems (P=0.0058), and lack of money (P=0.0015). The most frequently utilized coping mechanisms were self-distraction (54.77%), active coping (69.85%), positive reframing (56.78%), planning (63.82%), acceptance (57.87%), and religion (57.79%). Latinos with higher perceived stress were more likely to report discrimination (OR: 3.401; 95%CI 1.285–9.004) and health problems (OR: 2.782; 95%CI 1.088–7.111) as stressors, and to use denial as a coping mechanism (OR: 2.904; 95%CI 1.280–6.589).

Conclusion: An increased prevalence of perceived stress among the Latinos evaluated in this study was associated with using denial as a coping mechanism, and encountering discrimination and health problems as sources of perceived stress. Most individuals responded to stressors by utilizing a variety of both adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms. (Ethn Dis. 2015;25[1]:78–82)

Key Words: Latino, Perceived Stress, Coping, Discrimination, Denial, Health Problems

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INTRODUCTION

Perceived stress is a construct that takes into account that the impact of a stressful event is affected by the cognitively mediated emotional response an individual has to that event.1 It reflects that it is not just exposure to the event, but also how it is perceived by the individual that causes stress. Perceived stress can impact health directly by causing symptoms such as depression, anxiety, irritability, fatigue, headache, indigestion, chest tightness, dizziness, sexual dysfunction, and menstrual disorders. Additionally, perceived stress can negatively affect health-related behaviors, resulting in people making unhealthy eating decisions, using substances such as alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs, having poor sleep and being more sedentary. This leads to perceived stress being associated with increased risks of poor health outcomes.2–5

Underserved populations such as Latinos may be at an increased risk for perceived stress due to increased exposure to unique stressors such as racism, discrimination, immigration, isolation, and acculturation. In addition to these particular stressors, Latinos are also often exposed to stressors common to the general population, such as low SES, income inequalities, and increased job stress with low control.5–8 This leaves Latinos especially vulnerable to the impact of perceived stress both due to increased exposure and less access to resources to deal with its effects.

Coping mechanisms are defined as deliberate, conscious efforts to control and adapt to stressors, and can be influenced by a variety of factors.9–12 However, little research has been done detailing the effect of coping mechanisms on perceived stress among Latinos. A study from 2005 found that individuals born in Mexico were more likely to use positive reframing, religion and denial as coping mechanisms, but less likely to use self-distraction and substance abuse when compared to non-Hispanic Whites.8 It also showed an association between several coping styles and perceived stress, but did not have participants identify stressors in their lives.

Although the Latino population may have unique circumstances leading to a vulnerability to perceived stress and depression, there is less known about the use of coping mechanisms in this population. It is important to better understand these stressors as well as the use of coping mechanisms, in order to implement a culturally sensitive and appropriate model of care that promotes both mental and physical health. Thus, the aim of our study was to evaluate the association of stress-related factors and the coping mechanisms used by Latino adults on perceived stress.

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