

Key Concepts : Stressful Life Event, Close Relationship, Self-Esteem, Depression.

## Stressful Life Event, Close Relationship, Self-Esteem, and Depression in College Women\*

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### ABSTRACT

Koreans rarely complain of depression or other psychological problems because mental illness is viewed as a stigmatizing and threatening experience. This study examined the relationships among stressful life events, close relationships, self-esteem, and depression in 400 college women aged 18 to 30 years. Depression was positively related to stressful life events ( $r = .21, p < .01$ ). Depression and stressful life events were negatively associated with self-esteem ( $r = -.67; r = -.11, p < .01; p < .05$  respectively). Close relationships with women and men friends were each negatively associated with depression ( $r = -.24; r = -.16, p < .01; p < .05$ ). Close relationships with women and men friends were positively associated with self-esteem ( $r = .23; r = .20, p < .01$ ). Forty nine percent of variance in depression rates in this sample was explained. After adjustment for degrees of freedom, a total of 49% of the variance in depression was explained by self-esteem and stressful life events. This investigation into the relationships among the variables influencing depression for college women is a critical issue as health professionals need to be aware that college women are at considerable risk for depression. Effective psychosocial interventions are those designed for specific populations to meet unique care needs and since young Korean women may be at considerable risk for depression.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Depression is a major health problem for women (Hauenstein, 1996). Women suffer from depression at a rate twice that of men, and an estimated 25% of North American women will experience an episode of depression in their lifetime (Steen, 1991). In the United States, women under the age of 30 are at greater risk for depression than women in other age group

(Kessler et al., 1994). These women will suffer varying degrees of impairment in their daily lives, including interpersonal relationships with family, and friends as well as in their work. This describes a serious, ongoing public health problem (Schreiber, 1996). The cost of depression to society is great. Nurses meet depressed women in all areas of nursing practice, yet relatively little research is available to guide practice (Gordon & Ledray, 1985).

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Until recently, depression in young women has not been considered as a serious problem. The psychiatric intervention with adult clients has long been a focus. Therefore, to effectively treat young women depression, many health professionals need to become more knowledgeable about the nature of this disorder.

During the last two decades, investigators have explored the relationship between the conditions of women's lives and their mental health. Some have related the socially disadvantaged status of women or their socialization to a traditional feminine role, to depression and low self-esteem (Weissman & Klerman, 1987). Others have emphasized the consequences of women's roles, or the balance of social demands and resources, on their well-being (McBride, 1990; Woods, Lentz, Mitchell & Oakley, 1992). Recently, the effects of social support and self-esteem on depression in young women experiencing stressful life events were tested (Beeber, 1998).

Koreans rarely complain of depression or other psychological problems because mental illness is viewed as a stigmatizing and threatening experience. Instead, they tend to present somatic complaints rather than psychological ones when they wish to express emotional distress or social problems (Kim & Rew, 1994). Recent research suggests that young women have unique ways of adjusting to stressful life situations (Brage, 1995). Many are able to restructure their lives in such a way as to maintain or regain reasonable levels of happiness and life satisfaction. However, little is known about how young Korean women deal with stressful life situations, close relationships, and self-esteem within the context of college life, depression in Korean college women may be more fully understood. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between stressful life situation, close relationship, self-esteem, and depression in college women.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on depression in young women has indicated that women are more susceptible to develop depressive symptoms during the early years of adulthood when they are beginning to focus on career development and relationships with significant others (Kizilay, 1992 ; Beeber, 1996). Beeber(1996) explained depression as a hurdle for young women. Young women who experience moderate or severe symptoms of depression may mislead themselves and their families into disbelieving their pain. During late adolescence and early adulthood, a great explosion of energy may be needed to accomplish the task of settling on life pathways. Poor academic performance in high school and college creates "evidence" of low ability. Depressive symptoms such as irritability and social withdrawal may leave a young woman without an interpersonal field. Therapeutic interventions cannot be easily be provided when a young woman expresses her despair, low self-esteem, and empty interpersonal world. These women may not meet criteria for major depression or dysthymic disorder(American Psychiatric Association, 1994), and this may affect whether their symptoms are taken seriously enough to assure treatment. Even if symptoms are recognized, a young woman's distress may not be viewed early enough to provide appropriate and timely professional intervention.

In Beeber's (1998) study in 184 college women, the interaction of stress, social support, and self-esteem indicated that the women with lower self-esteem were more vulnerable to depressive symptoms when their stress was high. This finding suggests that assessment of women experiencing stress should include an examination of their self-esteem and available support. The results showing that self-esteem mediated the depressive symptom-social support relationship suggests that a mere increase in

social support without an accompanying increase in self-esteem may not be effective in reducing depressive symptoms. Although limited to the sample, the findings established preliminary support for a model of factors relevant to depressive symptoms in American young women, and further clarified how social support can protect them from the noxious effects of stressful life events.

But Warren's (1997) research in 100 middle class African American women indicated that stressful life event and social support were related to depression but depression was not. Therefore, further clarification of these relationships in women will guide interventions using social support to reduce depressive symptoms that occur in the context of stressful life events.

### III. DESIGN AND METHODS

A correlational design was used to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the relationships among stressful life events, close relationships, self-esteem, and depression in college women?
- (2) To what extent do the variables, stressful life events, close relationships, and self-esteem explain depression in college women?

#### Subjects

The sample was composed of 400 women university students who were enrolled in baccalaureate and Registered Nurse-Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN-BSN) programs in a major private University in the Korea. The subjects consisted of 64 students in the Freshman year, 67 in the Sophomore year, 79 in the Junior year, and 74 in the Senior year in the baccalaureate nursing program and 71 students in the Junior year, and 45 in the Senior years in the RN-BSN nursing program.

Ages of the subjects ranged from 18 to 30 years with a mean age of 21.8 years. Of subjects, 43% (N=161) did not report family income. The range of family income reported is largely a middle income range. Fifty-seven (14.3%) subjects answered their monthly family income 2,000,000 won or less : 52 (13.0%) were 1,500,000 won or less : 37 (9.3%) were 1,000,000 won or less : 35 (8.8%) were 3,000,000 or less : 33 (8.3%) were 3,100,000 or more.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected by administering a battery of research instruments. The subjects completed the data collection instruments in their class room.

The four instruments included in the battery for data collection were : The Schedule of Recent Life Events/Recent Life Changes Questionnaire (SRLE/RLCQ), the close Relationship Scale (CRS), the Self Esteem Inventory (SEI), and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). SRLE/RLCQ was translated into the Korean language by the investigator, and other instruments were used the Korean versions.

The SRLE/RLCQ was developed by Lin, Dean, and Ensel(1986) to assess the number of stressful life events and a person's perception of the intensity of the event over the last 6 months. Respondents indicate which events have occurred and then rate the event as "good, bad, or not sure." The unweighted life event total is considered a measure of life stress. The SRLE/RLCQ is a 118-items scale. Seventeen items(e.g., issues of retirement) were not applicable to women in a young age group and were therefore, omitted for this study. The Cronbach's alpha was not calculated for this study based on recommendations from the developers of the scale. Lin et al, (1986) have recommended that reliability cannot be assessed at one time period since each life event is

independent from the others. These researchers recommended that it be assessed over several time periods. According to Lin et al. (1986), validity has been shown by the consistency over time of the depression subscale correlations. CRS is a two item scale developed for this study. For each peer women and men friends, an 11-point rating scales measures the degree of intimacy in the relationship. The question was "How intimate are you with your friends?". The intimate relationship ratings range from 0 (not intimate at all) to 100 (very intimate). Since this scale has only two items, Cronbach's alpha for this study sample was not obtained.

The SEI, constructed by Coopersmith(1967), measures feelings about self. The Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory, Form A, was used to measure evaluative attitudes toward self in social, academic, family, and personal areas of experience (Coopersmith, 1981). It is a self-administered inventory which takes approximately 30 minutes to complete and has been used with age groups ranging from eight years through adulthood. Form A contains 58 items and yields a total score and subscores for domains of Social, School, and Parental. The inventory also contains an 8-item Lie score as a check for consistency in responses. Coopersmith (1981) reported Test-Retest reliability coefficients for adolescents ranged between .67 and .82. The Cronbach's alphas coefficient calculated for this study was .87.

The BDI is a 21-item rating scale that

assesses the current level of affective, cognitive, motivational, vegetative, and psychomotor components of depression (Beck, Steer & Garbin, 1988). Respondents are asked to rate their choice on a severity scale of 0 to 3 for each item. Scores may range from 0 to 63. The BDI has been used across a variety of ages and ethnic/racial/cultural groups including African American women(Warren, 1997) and Korean women university student (Oh, 1998). Cronbach's alpha for the sample of African American women was reported by Warren(1997) was .87. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient calculated for this study was .86.

#### Analysis of Data

The SPSS was used for analyzing data in this investigation. The frequency distribution(means, standard deviations, range) of all relevant variables were described. A correlation matrix of the study variables were computed. Descriptive statistics were used to provide a profile of the demographic characteristics of the sample. Data analysis were guided by the research questions.

## IV. RESULT

Stressful life event scores for the sample ranged from 0 to 31 with a mean of 7.94(SD= 5.33); scores for intimate relations with women friends ranged from 0 to 100 with a mean of 83.85(SD=14.84) and scores for close relations with men friends scores ranged from 0 to 100

<Table 1> Means, Standard Deviations, and Range for Major Study Variables(N=400)

Variables	Mean	SD	Range
Stressful life events	7.94	5.33	0- 31
Close relationship with women	83.85	14.84	0-100
Close relationship with men	75.92	20.48	0-100
Self esteem	163.16	20.66	81-222
Depression	10.32	6.67	0- 42

&lt;Table 2&gt; Participants' Ten Most Frequently Reported Stressful Life Events(N=400)

Stressful Life Events	frequency (%)
Vacation	224 (56.0)
Problems in school	164 (41.0)
Changes in sleeping habits	157 (39.3)
Changed living conditions	131 (32.8)
Changes in eating habits	127 (31.8)
Major decision regarding the future	126 (31.5)
Financial status a lot worse than usual	118 (29.5)
Started school	106 (26.5)
Began serious relationship	124 (26.0)
Increased arguments with partner	89 (22.3)

with a mean of 75.92(SD=20.48); self-esteem scores ranged from 81 to 222 with a mean of 163.16(SD=20.66); and depression scores ranged from 0 to 42 with a mean 10.32(SD=6.67) (Table 1). Forty-nine percent of the subjects reported the presence of symptoms of depression (BDI>10), with twenty percent scoring over 16 (moderate to severe symptoms).

Subjects reported 84 of a possible 101 stressful life events. The most frequently reported event was "vacation" (Table 2).

To answer the first research question concerning the relationship among the variables: stressful life events, close relationship, self esteem, and depression among college women, a correlation matrix was generated (Table 3). Depression was significantly and positively related to stressful life events ( $r = .21, p < .01$ ). Depression and stressful life events were significantly negatively associated with self-esteem ( $r = -.67; r = -.11, p < .01; p < .05$  respectively). Close relationships with women and men friends were each significantly negatively associated with depression( $r = -.24; r = -.16, p < .01; p < .05$ ). Close relationships with women and men friends were significantly positively associated with self-esteem( $r = .23; r = .20, p < .01$ ). Close relationships with women were significantly positively related to close relationship with men friends ( $r = .13, p =$

$<.05$ ). Close relationship with women and men friends were negatively associated with stressful life event but these relationships were not statistically significant. The relationship between conceptual variables and demographics was also examined. Family income and self-esteem were also negatively related also ( $r = -.13, p < .05$ ).

To answer the second research question, stepwise multiple regression procedures were used to determine if stressful life events, close relationships, and self-esteem were associated with depression. Table 4 displays the results of this analysis. Forty eight percent of variance in depression rates in this sample was explained. After adjustment for degree of freedom, a total of 48% of the variance in depression was explained by self-esteem, stressful life events and close relationship with woman friends.

## V. DISCUSSION

Scores on the SRLE/RLCQ ranged from 0 to 31 which indicates that the women in this study experienced a number of stressor over the last 6 months. In Warren(1997), scores on the SRLE/RLCQ ranged from 4 to 88 for middle class African American women. One of the reasons for the different range between these two studies might be the sensitivity of the scale used to measure stressful life events for this

<Table 3> Correlations of Demographics, Stressful Life Event, Closed Relationship, Self-Esteem, and Depression Among college women (N=400)

Variables	Stress life event	Intimate relationship with women	Intimate relationship with men	Self esteem	Depression
Stress life event	1.00				
Close relationship with women	-.005	1.00			
Close relationship with men	-.039	.027*	1.00		
Self esteem	-.114*	.233**	.197**	1.00	
Depression	.208*	-.236**	-.159**	-.670**	1.00
Family income	.082	.183**	-.016	-.128*	.050
Age	.057	-.059	.059	.052	.070
Grade	-.037	-.064	.116	.069	.035

\* :  $p < .05$

\*\* :  $p < .01$

<Table 4> Stepwise Regression of Self-Esteem and Stressful Life Events as Predictors of Depression in College Women (n=400)

Variables	R2	Adjusted R2	Beta	F	p
Self esteem	.455	.454	-.675	318.904	.000
Stress life event	.473	.470	-.657	170.645	.000
Closerelationship with women	.479	.475	.134 -.638 .135 -.080	116.284	.000

sample of Korean women University students. There is a statistically significant correlation between stressful life events and depression. The results are supportive of previous research which indicated that European American and African American women experiencing high numbers of stressful life events were at increased risk to develop depressive symptomatology (Beeber, 1998; Warren, 1997).

Scores on the Close relationship scale which was developed by the investigators for this

study were significantly related to the subjects' self-esteem and depression. This finding is similar to that of Woods, Lentz, Mitchell & Oakley(1992) who tested the effects of personal resources, social demands and resources, socialization, and women's roles, on self-esteem and depressed mood in young adult Asian, Black, and White women in America. Social network and social demands variables as well as personal resources were common to each group as predictors of self-esteem and depression. For

Asian women, unconflicted network size and income reduced the likelihood of depressed mood. In the study by Woods et al.(1994), these models of depression and self-esteem underscore the importance of women's social networks in protecting them from depression and enhancing their self-esteem if these networks are characterized by little conflict. When conflict characterizes the relationships, however, the network erodes self-esteem and contributes to depression (Woods et al., 1994). Other researcher examined the effects of social support on depression in young women experiencing stressful life events (Warren, 1997). The social support variable provided by family and friends is operationally defined and measured in various way. Specifically, close relationships with peer women and men friends which is known effective to young women was investigated in this study. This finding indicates that young women who have a lower degree of close relationships with peer women and men friends had lower self-esteem and higher depression scores.

Self-esteem measured by the SEI was significantly associated with symptoms of depression and stressful life events. This finding shows that young women who have a lower degree of self-esteem had higher depression scores and stressful life event scores. This finding is similar to Beer's(1998) research on middle class European American women.

This sample in this study had a different percentage of women who scored in the moderate(49%) depressive ranges as compared with Beeber's(1998) sample of European American young women(38%) and Warren's(1997) sample of middle class African American women(79%). Differences in findings might be because of the chronological age and/or ethnicity of women. Depression is a major psychiatric illness and has long been a focus of psychiatric intervention with adult client. Until recently, depression in young

women has not been considered a serious problem (Brage, 1995). Depression is associated with gender and age. Likewise, different therapeutic interventions can be examined within diverse populations (Brage, 1995). Depressive symptoms were evident in nearly one half of the sample, and the theoretically predicted factors of self-esteem, support, and life stressors were meaningfully associated with distress in these young women.

Age, grade level, and family income were explored in the demographic questionnaire. It was assumed that close relationships, stressful life events, self-esteem, and depression were related to family income. Close relationships with peer women friends and self-esteem were significantly correlated with family income. But the subject's stressful life events and depression were not significantly related to family income. The reason for this result might be related to the number of missing data. Additionally, age and grade level were not significantly related to the major variables.

## VI. SUGGESTION AND IMPLICATIONS

Several limitations were identified in the study. This study was limited to a one group design and nonprobability sample of women who enrolled in a nursing program in one university. Thus, findings cannot be generated to all Korean young women. Additionally, the use of a descriptive exploratory study that only examines one point in time is not enough to explain the relationship among the major variables. Other weakness include the use of research instruments that were developed for American population. In particular, many items in the SRLE/RLCQ (Lin et al., 1986) were not directly related to the stressful life events of college women. Two items in the close relationship were developed by investigators. Therefore, a more sensitive measure of close relationship might be more meaningful with this

population. Suggestions for addressing these weaknesses in future research might include the use of longitudinal design, further testing of depression and other variables in other young Korean women.

There are several implications for health professionals from this study. The findings serve as a basis for recommendations for future studies. This investigation into the relationships among the variables influencing depression for young women is a critical issue as health professionals need to be aware that college women are at considerable risk for depression. However, little research has been conducted to examine depressive symptoms or mental health in young women. Effective psychosocial interventions are those designed for specific populations to meet unique care needs (Hauenstein, 1997) and since young women may be at considerable risk for depression, health professionals must consider effective means for assessing such symptoms and delivering mental health services to this population. For college women as a group, there is stigma associated with reporting psychological distress. Young Korean women tend to express their conflicts as somatic complaints and avoid using psychiatric nursing interventions and services. Because young women tend to underuse formal mental health services, informal clinic settings in which health care is integrated with social and life skill services may be more helpful. For example nurses could provide assessment and intervention services in community mental health center or within school health areas. Effective group interventions could be readily delivered.

The findings of this study are useful in planning both health-promotion and mental illness prevention programs. The significance of close relationships and self-esteem as factors relating to depression in college women has been shown. These findings are important for

nurses and other health professionals who, in performing a comprehensive assessment of young women, can evaluate the characteristics of close relationships and self-esteem. After identification of potential risk factors, nurses could then plan mental health-promoting interventions aimed at decreasing or minimizing the risk factors associated with mental illness in young women (Schreiber, 1996). Additionally, nurses could provide prevention programs in the form of educational interventions for young women.

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