

Resilience, Coping with an Extended Stay Outdoor Education Program,  
and Adolescent Mental Health

Claire M. Skehill

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Abstract

Due to the alarming increase in adolescent depression and suicide, identification of protective personality characteristics is essential in order to determine those adolescents at risk, and to develop and evaluate intervention programs. This longitudinal survey was conducted to ascertain the relationships between adolescent resilience, coping styles and their perceived effectiveness, stress appraisals, and measures of psychological well-being and distress in response to a potentially stressful experience - an Extended Stay Outdoor Education Program (ESOEP). Participants were 99 Year 9 Australian adolescents (71 male, 28 female) attending a potentially stressful ESOEP, which aims to bolster adolescents' levels of resilience, resourcefulness and mental health outcomes.

For the present study it was hypothesised that: attending the ESOEP would enhance resilience; that adolescents with high levels of pre-existing resilience would use more productive, and less non-productive, coping strategies during the ESOEP; that adolescents with high resilience, low perceptions of stress, and increased use of productive coping strategies would have greater mental health following the ESOEP; and that coping styles and their perceived effectiveness would mediate the relationship between resilience and mental health measures.

This study found that attending the ESOEP neither increased resilience and well-being, nor decreased distress. As anticipated, high levels of resilience were associated with using productive coping strategies, perceiving these strategies as effective, lower appraisal of stress, and increased mental health measures five weeks into the ESOEP. Gender differences were explored in relation to resilience, mental health and coping styles, with the only significant difference being greater utilisation of “solving the problem” coping strategies by males. This study also determined that the perceived effectiveness of coping styles, rather than the actual coping styles adopted, mediates the relationship between resilience and psychological distress five weeks into the ESOEP. Applications of these findings, theoretical implications, methodological concerns, and directions for future research are discussed.