

## Psychology

# No need to stress when the dissertation deadline approaches

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### ABSTRACT

We find that students are not more stressed or handle their stress differently at different points during the dissertation year. However, stress and coping are connected to tasks and challenges at hand. Additionally, students change their thinking about the dissertation over time. First, the dissertation is new and negatively perceived, then as a challenge and in the end negatively again.



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At most universities, students are supposed to write a dissertation at the end of their studies. Previous studies suggest that students perceive writing such dissertations as stressful. Such perceptions are dependent on a process called cognitive appraisal - the subjective reaction to what happens around a person- during which students will assess whether a situation is relevant and whether they are able to handle the situation. Students likely perceive their dissertation as relevant as it will influence a considerable part of the final grade. Students might also not feel like they have full control, sufficient knowledge or resources at all times and stages while writing their dissertation. These

may cause stress which students can cope with [different coping strategies](#), often grouped into emotion-focussed or problem-focussed coping. Subsequently, the process of appraisal and then coping is being repeated when the situation has not successfully been coped with. Hence, different appraisal and coping styles contribute differentially to students' stress levels, and in the long run wellbeing and health. Nevertheless, the connection between appraisal, coping and stress has not yet been observed previously. We were therefore interested in how appraisal, coping and stress interact during the dissertation year, which we assumed to be a stressful time.

Sixty-four participants filled in an online survey at the beginning, middle and end of the academic year. The survey asked about the stress levels and how often different coping strategies were used during the last month, such as getting emotional support from others or alcohol and drugs. Another questionnaire addressed the students' dissertation appraisal directly, or in other words, how much they agree/disagree with statements about the dissertation, such as "this dissertation has negatively affected my life". Finally, students were asked to write down what concerned them about the dissertation, what in their lives caused stress at the moment, and how they personally coped with dissertation related challenges.

Interestingly, students did not get more stressed towards the end of the year with deadlines and exams approaching. Problematically, although our stress questionnaire is an established instrument, it did not do well in measuring stress reliably. However, students' thinking about the dissertation and their stress coping strategies explained their stress levels well. The contribution of specific types of appraisal and coping strategies to stress levels remains however unclear, as their impact changed over time.

Students did also not change how they were coping with stress. Yet, their perception of the dissertation did. In the beginning of the dissertation year, students perceived the dissertation as harmful and connected feelings of loss, benign or irrelevance to it. Towards the middle of the year, the dissertation was perceived more positive, as a challenge. And in the end of the year, the rather negative perception of the year's start returned.

As we were interested in the underlying individual and student-population-specific mechanisms, we looked at the responses students gave to open questions. These data are more difficult to interpret as they were only supplied by circa  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the participants. The biggest concerns about the dissertation of those who answered were time management, data collection, feedback and the final grade. The top three coping styles were to do sports, work more on the dissertation, and to count on the support from others. Those partly reflect the questionnaire on coping. Stress besides the dissertation was mainly induced by having to work on courses besides the dissertation, in a job or volunteering position, or by planning the future after achieving the degree. Based on our observations, it can be assumed that students had less time for activities which help coming with dissertation-related stress towards the end of the year. This seems to have affected some students' coping styles.

This study might be a valuable source of information, specifically for teachers and supervisors but also for family and friends. How students think about the dissertation and cope with related stress will influence their stress-levels. As this can impact students' wellbeing, it is important to support students where possible. Time management seems to be a struggle during the dissertation. We suggested therefore to help with the planning process from the very beginning of the dissertation. Additionally, open dialogues and creating awareness about stress and health, and continuous contact between supervisor and student might be a recipe for a successful and healthy dissertation year. This can be arranged by a study module which accompanies the dissertation.