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The relationship between stressful life events and risky sexual behavior

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The Relationship between Stressful Life Events and Risky Sexual Behavior

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Introduction

- Spit for Science: the VCU Student Survey aims to understand how genetic and environmental factors come together to influence substance use and emotional health.
- Previous research has shown that stress has been linked to high risk behavior.^[1]
- Most previous research examines the relationship between risky sexual behavior and stressful life events (usually focusing on sexual assault). This research project also includes other types of stressful life events.
- Research has also shown that victims of sexual assault are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior as a means to cope with trauma.^[1]
- It is hypothesized that college students who have experienced stressful life events in the past twelve months will have higher risky sexual behavior scores than those who have not.

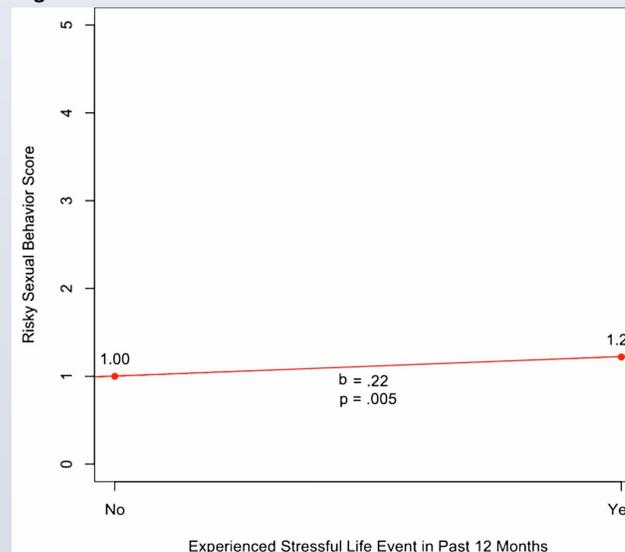
Methods

- In the fall of 2011, incoming VCU freshman were invited to take the Spit for Science survey and also provide a saliva sample.
- Survey responses regarding risky sexual behavior were combined into a sum score depending on how many different items the students endorsed.
- A point was given for every item that the students reported experiencing. The items were: having unprotected sex in the last 3 months, not using protection the last time you had sex, sex with 3 or more people in the last three months, sex while under the influence in the last 3 months and whether or not your first sexual experience was before you were 13.
- Students were also asked to fill out a survey regarding their stressful life events.
- The stressful life event categories were: have you experienced any traumatic experience in the last 12 months, have you experienced any traumatic interpersonal event in the last three months, have you experienced a traumatic sex event in the last three months.
- Linear regression (n=970) was used to test for association between risky sexual behavior and stressful life events.

Results

- ❖ **Figure 1** shows there was a significant association between risky sexual behavior and the total number of stressful life events ($p=1.2 \times 10^{-13}$)
- ❖ There was a significant association between risky sexual behavior and stressful life events.
- ❖ As the number of stressful life events increased, so did risky sexual behavior.

Figure 2



- ❖ **Figure 2** shows the relationship between experiencing a stressful life event in the last 12 months and risky sexual behavior

- ❖ **Experiencing a stressful interpersonal event in the last 12 months led to higher risky behavior scores than experiencing any other kind of tested stressful life event**

Figure 1

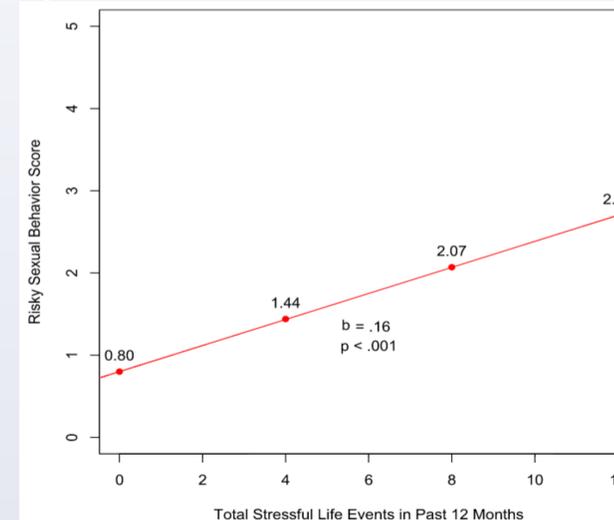
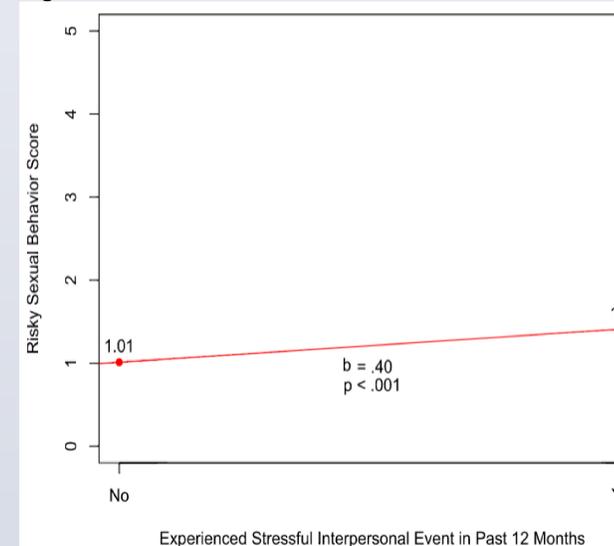


Figure 3



- ❖ **Figure 3** shows the relationship between experiencing a stressful interpersonal life event in the last 12 months and risky sexual behavior

Conclusions

- Those who have experienced stressful life events have higher risky sexual behavior scores.
- Different types of stressful life events impact risky sexual behavior.
- There might be a dose-response relationship where more stressful life events lead to more risky sexual behavior.
- Those who have experienced stressful life events may benefit from targeted sex education training.
- Limitations included that our sample solely focused on college juniors which is not representative. Also the study could not determine the direction of causation due to cross-sectional design.
- Future studies should examine longitudinal data as well to better establish examine how stress and sexual behavior change over time. This would help with determining the direction of causation as well.

References

1. Turchik, J. A., & Hassija, C. M. (2014). Female sexual victimization among college students: Assault severity, health risk behaviors, and asexual functioning. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 29*(13), 2439-2457. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0886260513520230>

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