What makes the everyday life of Swedish adolescent girls less stressful: a qualitative analysis

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SUMMARY
Stress is a widespread phenomenon in society today, not least among children and adolescents. Stress-related ill-health has increased in this population and affects girls to a greater extent than boys. Against this background, it is important to acquire knowledge about measures that prevent stress, especially in girls. The aim of this study was therefore to illuminate adolescent girls’ experiences and reflections about what makes everyday life less stressful. An explorative design, qualitative content analysis, was used. In-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen 17-year-old girls. The analysis comprised both manifest and latent content and revealed the girls’ own experiences of and reflections about what makes everyday life less stressful. Three categories, ‘Enjoyment and Recovery’, ‘Trust’ and ‘Insight and Influence’, and nine subcategories emerged. The latent content of these categories is described by the theme ‘access to sources of strength’. It is essential that persons in the girls’ surroundings are aware of all sources that provide the strength to resist and prevent stress in everyday life. A climate has to be created in all arenas of the girls’ everyday life in which they can access these sources of strength. Utilizing the girls’ experiences and views about what needs to be done is the first step towards a preventive and promotive mode of working on their own circumstances and wishes. This approach is consistent with the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, which emphasizes the importance of involving the target group.

Key words: adolescent girls; health promotion; stress prevention; qualitative content analysis

BACKGROUND
Stress is a widespread phenomenon in society today that affects everyone, including children and young adults (Boström and Nykvist, 2004; Currie et al., 2004). This has resulted in the growth of stress-related ill-health, which increases during the teenage years and affect girls more than boys (Rudolph, 2002; Currie et al., 2004). Both boys and girls are more seriously affected by everyday stress than adults (Dumont and Provost, 1999), and girls are more sensitive to interpersonal stress than boys (Rudolph, 2002; Hampel and Petermann, 2006). Young people from Europe, Canada and the USA have reported worrying health risk behaviour (Tountas and Dimitrakaki, 2006), and when compared with other countries, it appears that stress among young people, particularly girls, is widespread in Sweden (Currie et al., 2008). In Sweden, the mental well-being of 16–19-year-old girls has deteriorated a great deal since about 1990 (SoS, 2009). In order to reverse this negative trend in society, we must deepen our knowledge of stress prevention measures, not least for girls and also work
towards strengthening health and well-being (Eriksson and Lindström, 2008).

Lazarus and Folkman (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) use the term ‘coping’ to define cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage stress. Older adolescents exhibit a greater variety of coping strategies than their younger counterparts, which also includes cognitive components such as problem-solving and reappraisal skills (Williams and McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1999). Support-seeking and problem analysis each have a positive influence on both girls and boys, whereas passive coping and risk-taking each have a negative impact on psychosocial health and well-being (Piko, 2001). Passive and support-seeking coping strategies are more common among girls (Piko, 2001). Factors that are known to protect and to act as buffers against stress include social support, physical activity, nutrition, a positive outlook on life and pleasurable activities and environments (Linden, 2005). A review on both qualitative and quantitative data in the literature shows among other things, young (11–21 years old) people’s views on what would promote their mental health (Oliver et al., 2008). The data show that they wished to receive help dealing with losses, to be listened, to be understood and to hear advice and information that is more relevant and focused on what to do rather than on the problem in general. This review also found that interventions aimed at preventing mental ill-health or promoting mental health did not take adolescents’ own views into account, and the few qualitative studies that are available on this topic lacked methodological rigour (Oliver et al., 2008).

Health-promoting schools are an important arena for health promotion (Mittelmark, 2007). Health-promoting schools are, to a large extent, built on cooperation among pupils, teachers, parents and other people in the immediate surroundings, and they increase opportunities to strengthen pupils’ well-being (Lee et al., 2005; Stewart-Brown, 2006). In order to support young people’s ability to control over and strengthen their health in accordance with the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization, 1986; Rootman et al., 2001; Eriksson and Lindström, 2008), deeper knowledge of stress prevention and health promotion is necessary. The aim of this study was therefore to illuminate adolescent girls’ experiences and reflections about what makes everyday life less stressful.

METHODS

Design and setting

The study has an explorative design, qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). It was conducted in a 1500-pupil secondary school (grades 10–12) in a municipality on the west coast of Sweden that has a population of ~40 000.

Informants and data collection

All 11th-grade secondary school girls were invited to participate during an information meeting about the study. They were also asked to respond to three questions about (i) their degree of perceived stress (low, medium or high) at school, at home and during leisure time, (ii) their type of school programme (practical or theoretical) and (iii) their type of residential area (densely populated area, small town or rural area). The answers to these questions formed the criteria for the strategic selection. Ninety girls answered the questions, and 15 of them were selected to take part in individual in-depth interviews. Each interview started with the following open-ended questions: (i) what do you do in order to reduce stress?; (ii) what do you yourself need to do in order to reduce stress? and (iii) what do others need to do in order to reduce your stress? Each question was followed by probing questions in order to clarify and deepen the understanding of the girls’ responses. A pilot interview was conducted, and it was deemed to be informative and reflective enough to be included in the study. The interviews took place in undisturbed settings and the girls were consulted about the location, which contributed to a trusting relationship. The interviews were 1 h long and were conducted by the first author, who is a public health scientist; they were audio taped and later transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The analysis included both manifest and latent content (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). First, the transcription of each interview was read on several occasions in order to become familiar with its content. Next, meaning-carrying units that corresponded with the aim of the study were extracted. In the next step of the analysis,
the meaning-carrying units were condensed and abstracted into codes. These codes were compared in order to identify differences and similarities, and they were then sorted into categories. In each step of the analysis, comparisons were made with the context in order to verify the empirical base of the data (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). To increase the trustworthiness of the study, an interdisciplinary team with experience in public health, pedagogy, caring and medical science participated in both the research design and data analysis process.

**Ethical approval**

The study was approved by the Regional Ethics Committee at the University of Gothenburg and permission was granted by the Director of the School where subjects were recruited. At the informational meeting at the school, the girls were verbally informed about the aim of the study, its design, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time and the confidential treatment of data. When they were selected for inclusion, the girls were provided with written information about the study's aim and design as well as their rights as participants. The girls gave their informed consent and their parents were also provided with written information, as the girls were under the age of legal consent.

**RESULTS**

The interviews revealed the girls’ own experiences of and reflections on what makes their everyday life less stressful. Three categories emerged: ‘Enjoyment and Recovery’, ‘Trust’ and ‘Insight and Influence’. The latent content of these categories is described by the theme ‘Access to sources of strength’ (Figure 1). The result indicates different sources of strength that both individually and in combination can reduce and prevent stress in the everyday life of 17-year-old girls.

**Enjoyment and recovery**

This category describes how enjoyment and recovery are important for reducing the feeling of stress in everyday life. The girls reported that leisure and cultural activities, feeling free of restrictions, relaxation and massage, spending time with friends and proximity to pets gave them such a feeling. Leisure and cultural activities consisted of exercise, music, dancing, reading literature and writing to express their thoughts. Exercise included both indoor and outdoor training and, if girls were exercising alone, provided time for reflection ‘I often think a great deal when I’m running and it feels good, because after all you are alone in the woods or wherever you run. And when I get home I have a very nice feeling, a peaceful feeling’ (no. 1). Listening to or playing music and singing gave the girls pleasure but also a feeling of peace and quiet. Girls who had no hobbies wished to receive help in finding such activities, as the hobbies were thought to provide enjoyment and recovery. Feeling free of restrictions involved the importance of having time of one’s own with no pre-planned activities or demands ‘Yes, a day when I feel that I don’t have to do this and that and then something else later. That day is mine and I can take it easy, do nothing. Just be myself’ (no. 11). The girls’ feelings of stress were reduced when they were alone by choice, as well as when they were given some time to themselves in a relationship. The girls had positive experiences with relaxation exercises that were carried out to music or according to instructions on a tape and with giving each other massages. Spending time with friends both at school and during leisure time was also an important means of reducing stress. At school, the girls used breaks and free periods to spend time with friends in an unpretentious and undemanding manner, and after school they met their friends at home or somewhere like a café; these experiences afforded both enjoyment and recovery. Humour or being able to laugh together with one’s friends was perceived as releasing in situ-ations that were otherwise experienced as stressful. Experiencing proximity to pets also gave the girls a feeling of enjoyment and recovery. Girls described the importance of being both needed and seen by pets ‘They are always there…/One doesn’t become so stressed when in the company of animals…/Yes, one doesn’t think very much about it, one is just out walking the dog reflecting on all sorts of things…/It is fun, because one receives a warm welcome when one comes home from school. And is noticed’ (no. 10).

**Trust**

This category describes the importance of trust in minimizing stress in everyday life.
Fig. 1: Sources of strength that individually and in combination makes 17-year-old school girls everyday life less stressful.

Insight and influence

This category describes the importance of insight and influence for reducing stress in everyday life, which was achieved by problem-solving and being listened to. Problem-solving meant gaining insight through self-reflection, that possible solutions to problems existed, which reduced the feeling of stress and increased influence over one’s own situation. In practical terms for instance, this involved thinking about or writing lists of daily tasks and activities in order to prioritize them. An individual problem-solving approach could, for example, involve the retreat to a quiet environment to study without being disturbed: this made it easier to concentrate and thereby reduced feelings of stress. To get influence over the school situation the girl required to gain insight, through self-reflection, of what was necessary in order to perceive school as less stressful; it also necessary for girls being listened to and had their views met with sympathy. This involved both the physical learning environment and the education in general. In terms of the physical learning environment at school, the girls wished to have more flexibility in places to study, smaller classrooms, better ventilation and teachers who were present to maintain order: they considered these to be factors that would contribute to a less stressful physical environment at school. In terms of their overall education, the girls wanted teachers who listened closely to them in order to understand their needs and who gave feedback. They also wanted to participate and collaborate with teachers in the area of goals, expectations and performance. “More collaboration between teachers and pupils. Talk through what you are supposed to do and how we pupils can pass the exams” (no. 10). There were a few examples of experiences with teachers who had listened to
and planned tests together with the girls, which had reduced their feelings of stress. They therefore wished that this would happen more regularly with both tests and homework assignments. Some girls had also experienced being involved, together with teachers and parents, in the preparation of individual study plans that enabled them to manage their school work or to move to another class in the event of special problems. Parents could also be involved in various issues related to school work, even in cases where no specific problems existed. The girls’ perception was that it was difficult to find teachers for this purpose. In order to reduce stress, the girls wished to be able to influence the course content, so that information about stress, planning and prioritizing as well as regular practical exercises in relaxation, massage and yoga, could be introduced into the timetable. ‘It would be good if more about health was taught at school, as the subject is a part of PE and health. But very little is actually said about health / …/ It could deal with how to manage stress or things like that’ (no. 4). The girls also wished to have more PE lessons. These changes were considered essential to overall well-being and to the reduction in everyday stress, both for themselves and others. Teachers were also deemed to require such knowledge.

DISCUSSION

Discussion of methods
Qualitative content analysis was chosen in order to reveal the variation and diversity in the material (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Selecting young girls who had different experiences of stress in everyday life (at school, at home and during leisure time), lived in different types of residential areas and attended different types of school programmes increased the possibility of illuminating the research question from a variety of angles, which is important for the credibility of the results (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The inclusion of quotations from the interviews in the presentation of the results facilitates appraisal of the study’s credibility, whereas trustworthiness is strengthened by the fact that a group of researchers with different research experiences performed the analysis by discussions until consensus was achieved (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004; Polit and Beck, 2006). During each interview, the researcher endeavoured to create a mutually trusting relationship with the informant as well as an environment that was as calm and undisturbed as possible. The informant was aware of her rights in connection with the interview and had received both oral and written information about them, which is important for dependability. The research process, including its design and implementation, has been described in detail and the steps involved in the analysis have been carefully outlined (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). A possible weakness of the study is the uncertainty about whether the sample was large enough to generate major variation. Another limitation could be the duration of the interview; 1 h may be too short. However, the interviews were deemed to be rich and contain great variety.

Discussion of results
Access to different sources of strength in order to buffer stress is in line with the Salutogenic approach to health promotion. In this perspective, these sources of strength are used to create or contribute to health and well-being (Eriksson and Lindström, 2008). The sources of strength described by the girls have various orientations, one of which is the self (i.e., what one can do and what one actually does in order to reduce stress). Most of what is described under the category ‘Enjoyment and Recovery’ is considered crucial to the management of stress and to regain strength in everyday life. Previous studies have reported that physical activity reduces stress (Hassmén et al., 2000; Linden, 2005). A double effect was observed when physical activity took place outdoors, since spending time in nature also promotes health, reduces stress and strengthens the ability to recover from stress (Maller et al., 2005).

Different forms of musical practice were also emphasized as important. Healthy adults who took part in a music intervention exhibited reduced stress levels and improved mood (McKinney et al., 1997). A music intervention for 11–12-year-olds resulted in lower levels of cortisol in saliva but no change in reported physical symptoms (Lindblad et al., 2007). Studies about the importance of music are not available for our target group.
The girls used different relaxation and massage exercises in order to unwind and regain new strength. The ability to relax and to give and receive massage is an important recovery technique that also affords new energy (Uvnäs Moberg, 2000; Field, 2002; Linden, 2005). This finding corresponds to a study indicating that the introduction of massage and relaxation into the school timetable during one school year for 12–15-year-old pupils had the effect of maintain their well-being related to stress (Haraldsson et al., 2008). Previous research has demonstrated the importance of pets in terms of reducing stress related to various diseases (Allen et al., 2002; Linden, 2005), but the present study reveals that young and healthy girls also consider animals to be an important factor in stress reduction.

The second orientation described the importance of one’s surroundings. In addition to the significance of social contacts for enjoyment and recovery, the girls regarded trust in others as vital to reducing stress. A relationship has been found between trust and self-reported health, life satisfaction, functional health and mortality (Barefoot et al., 1998). The girls in our study regarded emotional support as especially important in both large and small life-issues. It is a recognized fact that parental support in comparison with friends decreases during the teenage years (Scholte et al., 2001), although the girls in our study considered emotional support from both parents and friends to be essential for the reduction in feelings of stress. Support from other adults, e.g. school staff, has also been identified as important (Ellonen and Kääriäinen, 2008). One interesting observation in our study was that the professional secrecy of the youth chaplain was underlined as a particularly positive aspect of emotional support. Girls of this age are in a sensitive developmental period (Eccles et al., 2008) characterized by a great deal of interpersonal stress (Rudolph, 2002; Hampel and Petermann, 2006), and the opportunity to talk frankly with an adult outside the family with the knowledge that their thoughts and narratives will not be communicated to anyone may be especially important. Increased future collaboration between the Swedish state church and schools could contribute to a greater sense of security, something that is emphasized in the national public health goals (Sveriges Regering, 2007/08:110).

The third orientation that emerged in this study concerned insight and influence, both in terms of one’s self and the role of people in one’s environment. The girls had gained the insight that in order to experience less stress, it was essential to find a solution to the problems themselves, i.e. the most common coping strategy for dealing with everyday problems (Williams and McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1999). Hampel and Petermann (Hampel and Petermann, 2006) reported that young people who were active in finding solutions to their problems experienced less stress when weighing their options; these findings support our study. The girls realized that having an increased influence over their school situation was an important aspect of stress prevention. This perspective is supported by both the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1977:1160) and the Education Act (1985:1100). The opportunity to influence one’s own situation is also consistent with the guidelines set out in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization, 1986; Rootman et al., 2001). Other studies also confirm the girls’ strong desire to have their views on their school situation listened to (Girod et al., 2005; The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2007) and indicate that their views have not been heeded and that the school climates do not provide the opportunity for pupils to exert an influence. It is of the utmost importance that the girls’ desire for increased influence over their school situation does not result in a single intervention but leads to permanent structural changes. Research has revealed that a more democratic school climate where ceilings are high and where pupils participate in decision-making about organizational issues leads to the perception that teachers and rules are more equitable (Vieno et al., 2005). The girls in the present study also wished to have more health promotional and stress reducing activities at school that would enable them to influence their situation. Intervention studies with such a focus were found for a somewhat younger target group, showing both a preventive and a health promotional effect (Bailey, 2006; Shek and Chow, 2006; Forneris et al., 2007; Hampel et al., 2008; Haraldsson et al., 2008). Pincus and Friedman (Pincus and Friedman, 2004) concluded that intervention studies have primarily focused on problem-oriented coping and that future interventions should also incorporate...
emotion-focused coping strategies like relaxation, recovery and distraction.

All three orientations have a practical implication for minimizing and resisting stress and strengthening the well-being of girls. It is vital that people in the environment understand this need to have access to sources of strength in everyday life. It is important that all arenas of the girls’ everyday lives have an open atmosphere in which sources of strength can be utilized and better conditions can be created for health promotion interventions. Taking into account the girls’ own experiences and views is an important first step towards the development of a preventive mode of working based on the target group members’ own circumstances and wishes. This is in accordance with the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, which clearly emphasizes participation of the target group (World Health Organization, 1986). It also corresponds to article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which sets out the right of children to express their views on all matters that concern them and for their views to be taken into account and given weight in relation to the child’s age and level of maturity (UN, 1989).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study describes the importance of having access to different sources of strength—enjoyment and recovery, trust, and insight and influence—in order to reduce and prevent stress in the everyday life of 17-year-old school girls. The fact that the results are based on the self-reported experiences and reflections of the target group is especially important for future public health programmes with both preventive and promoting perspective supported by the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, which emphasizes participation by the individual. This new knowledge can provide a basis for future interventions and contribute to a deeper and more enhanced understanding of the factors that buffer stress. It can also be employed by those who encounter young girls, whether parents and teachers on a daily basis or in centres for young people, recreation leaders, persons in primary care and others. Finally, this knowledge can serve as a basis for quantitative studies.

FUNDING

This work was supported by Halland County Council.

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