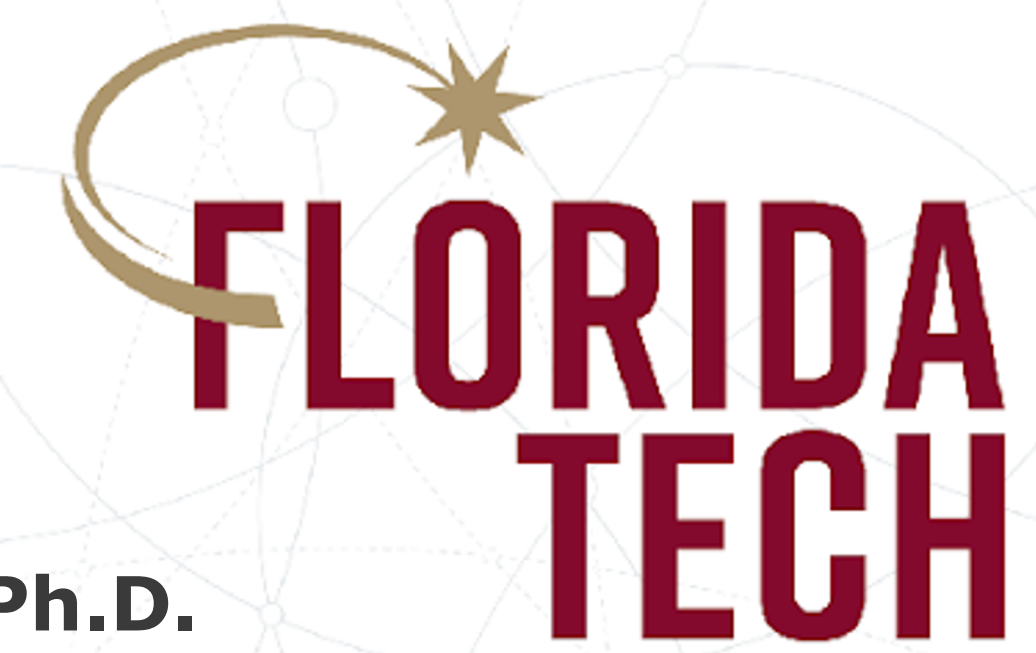


# Life Stressors and Coping in College Students



## The Role of Experiential Avoidance and Humor

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### INTRODUCTION

- College students are vulnerable to exposure to potentially traumatic events (PTEs) that threaten their overall sense of safety and lead to both short and long-term adverse outcomes (Galatzer-Levy, Burton, & Bonanno, 2012).
- The coping mechanisms these students use to alleviate the distress caused by PTEs impacts their psychological well-being.
  - Experiential avoidance--taking action to avoid the emotions and thoughts associated with the PTE--has been linked to increased psychological maladjustment and development of post-traumatic stress symptoms. (Rosenthal et al., 2005; Chawla & Ostafin, 2007)
  - Humor has been linked to have varying psychological outcomes, depending on the type of humor used.
    - Self-enhancing and affiliative humor (adaptive humor) are positively correlated with psychological well-being, greater self-esteem, and lower levels of depression and anxiety (Martin, 2007), while aggressive and self-defeating humor (maladaptive humor) are associated with depression and neuroticism, and negatively correlated with subjective well-being (Besser et al., 2015; Besser et al., 2012).
- As it is becoming more common for young adults to make light of various struggles by engaging in what may be considered "dark humor" it is worthwhile to investigate whether this new attitude of mental health-related humor is an adaptive coping mechanism, or if it is a new substring of experiential avoidance.
- This study therefore explores the relationship between humor styles, experiential avoidance, and post traumatic stress symptoms in college students.

### METHODS

- Participants signed up on an online database, SONA system for class credit and took a questionnaire survey on Qualtrics

#### Demographics:

- 99 college students participated
- Mean Age: 23.68 (range= 18-62)
- Gender Identity:
  - 44 Males
  - 54 Females
  - 1 Gender Non-Binary

#### Measures:

- Humor expression and experiences were assessed using the **Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ)**
- Symptoms associated with traumatic stressors were examined using a modified version of the **Trauma Symptom Checklist-33 (TSC-33)**
- The type of stressful event(s) participants experienced were assessed with the **17-Item Life Events Checklist-5 (LEC-5)**
- Psychological stress with respect to depression and anxiety was assessed with the **Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9)**
- Engaging in experiential avoidance (EA) was examined through the **Acceptance and Action Questionnaire- II (AAQ-II)**
- A 1-Item self-report measure to assess levels of stress associated with COVID-19

### RESULTS

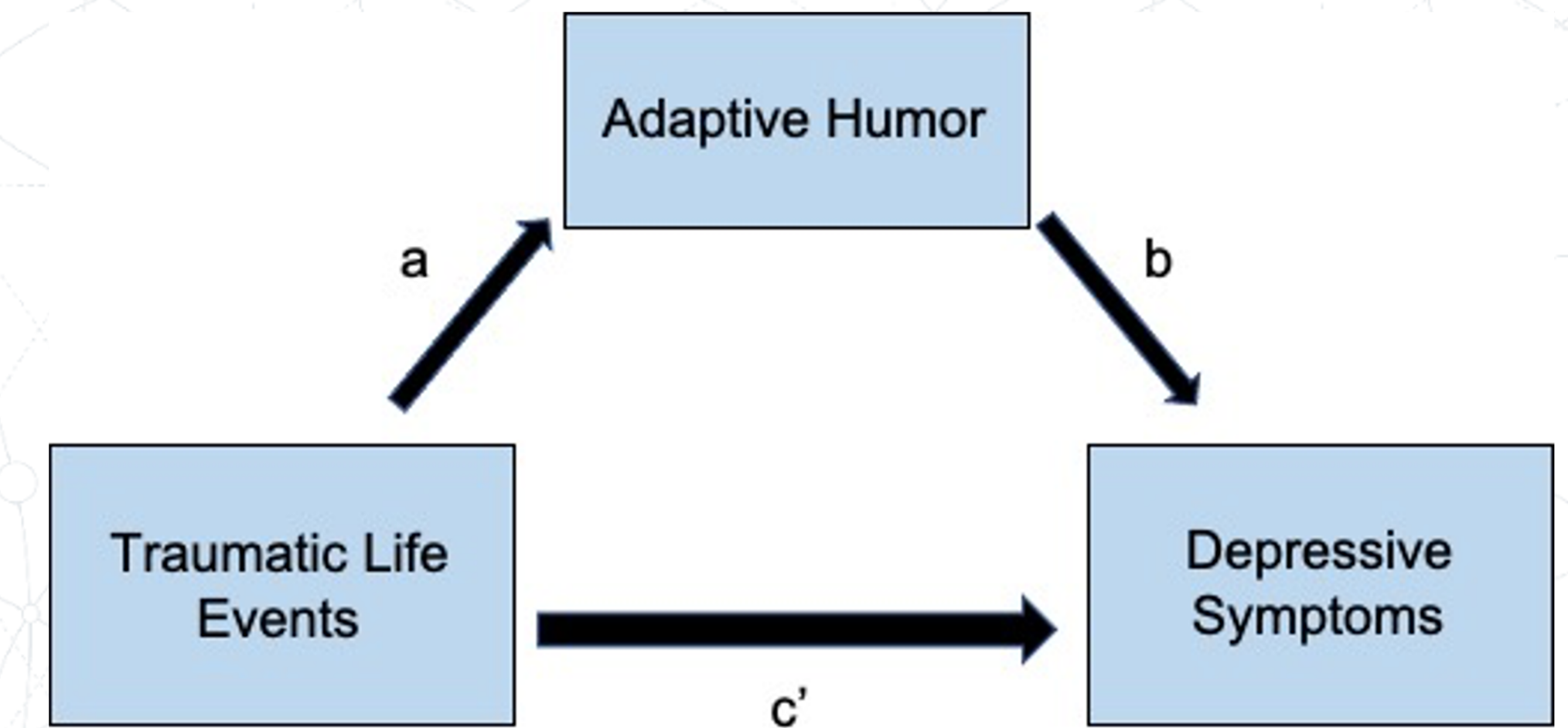
- We hypothesized that adaptive humor styles would be negatively correlated with experiential avoidance tendencies.** This hypothesis was supported, in that higher adaptive humor scores were suggestive of lower scores on the AAQ-II,  $r = -.326, p < .01$ .
- Adaptive humor styles were suggestive of lower scores on the PHQ-9, which is suggestive of higher depressive symptoms reported. Adaptive humor was positively associated with all categorizations of traumatic life events except for combat trauma.
- We also hypothesized that maladaptive humor styles would be positively correlated with experiential avoidance tendencies.** This hypothesis was supported, in that higher maladaptive humor scores were suggestive of higher scores on the AAQ-II,  $r = .313, p < .01$ .
- Maladaptive humor styles were suggestive of higher traumatic symptoms endorsed (TSC-33), as well as higher reported depressive symptoms (PHQ-9).
- We found that the AAQ-II measure of experiential avoidance was positively associated with traumatic symptoms endorsed (TSC-33), depressive symptoms reported (PHQ-9), and traumatic life events imposed by other individuals. The experiential avoidance measure was also positively correlated with participants' reports of higher COVID-19 related stress.

Table 1. Variable Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. TS	-									
2. PHQ	.829**	-								
3. AAQ	.666**	.666**	-							
4. All LEC	.240*	.208*	.159	-						
5. CMB LEC	-.021	-.081	.025	.097	-					
6. IP LEC	.349**	.290**	.284**	.917**	.008	-				
7. Other LEC	-.032	.007	-.107	.752**	.037	.440**	-			
8. COVID	.301**	.315**	.345**	.027	-.171	.116	-.104	-		
9. Adapt	-.142	-.228*	-.326**	.332**	-.167	.317**	.256*	-.073	-	
10. Mal	.312**	.273**	.313**	.028	.050	.059	-.058	.127	.152	-

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . TS= TSC-33 Total Score, PHQ= PHQ Total Score, AAQ= Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II Total Score, All LEC= Total LEC-5 score, CMB LEC = LEC-5 Combat Score, IP LEC = LEC-5 Interpersonal Score, Other LEC= All Other LEC-5 Items, COVID = COVID Stress, Adapt = Adaptive Humor HSQ Score, Mal = Maladaptive Humor HSQ Score.

- To investigate the relationship between traumatic life events, depressive symptoms, and adaptive humor styles, a simple mediation analysis was performed. The outcome variable for analysis was depressive symptoms (PHQ-9). The predictor variable for the analysis was traumatic life events (LEC-5). The mediator for the analysis was adaptive humor (HSQ). The indirect effect of traumatic life experiences on depressive symptoms was found to be statistically significant,  $-.30, 95\% \text{ CI } (-.83, -.08), p < .05$ .
- There is a full mediation effect for the relationship between traumatic life events and endorsed depressive symptoms, with adaptive humor styles as the mediator. The negative value ( $-.31$ ) indicates that adaptive humor plays a role in reduced depressive symptoms when considering higher levels of traumatic life events



### CONCLUSIONS

- Adaptive humor appears to play a role in decreased negative psychological experiences (i.e., experiential avoidance, depressive symptoms), while maladaptive humor appears to play a role in increased negative psychological experiences.
- Our results suggest that self-perceived COVID-19 related stress has a positive correlation with traumatic and depressive symptoms endorsed, as well as experiential avoidance. Further research should examine the role that adaptive versus maladaptive humor might play in an individual's ability to cope with COVID-19 related psychological consequences.
- The use of humor in ACT should be more fully investigated. There is some suggestion from the literature that this may be important for younger generations.

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\*For full list of references, please contact the author.