

Impact of External Locus of Control and Risk Perception on COVID-19 Related Stress among Undergraduates

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COVID-19 pandemic poses a major stressor for undergraduates worldwide with lockdown policies and the closure of the universities. Risk perception which contains emotional and cognitive types determines whether an individual would implement protective behaviors. Risk perception in the pandemic has led to the experience of stress due to the emergence of fatal novel strains of the virus and the unavailability of vaccination in parts of the country. According to Adams & Smith (2001), an individual's perception of the possibility of moderating or removing the risk, known as Locus of control (LOC) is central to risk perception. Many studies demonstrate the way in which risk perception mediates the relationship between LOC and stress reactivity. This study aims to explore whether LOC and risk perception play a role in stress among undergraduates. 371 undergraduates were recruited using convenient sampling method from the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya. Data was collected online during the initial lockdown period from March-April 2020. The questionnaire consisted of demographic information and content and consensually validated LOC, COVID-19 related Risk Perception and COVID-19 Stress Scales. External LOC had a significant positive relationship with both COVID-19 related risk perception, $r(369) = .151, p = .004$ and COVID-19 related stress, $r(369) = .131, p = .012$, indicating an increase in external LOC which leads to an increase in risk perception and COVID-19 related. Higher levels of risk perception lead to an increase in COVID-19 stress, $r(369) = .431, p = .000$. A Sobel test-based mediator analysis indicated emotional risk perception mediating the relationship between external LOC and COVID-19 stress. Emotional risk perception is a potential intervention point for managing stress among students whose sense of agency is external in the face of a pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, External locus of control, COVID-19 stress, COVID-19 risk perception, Undergraduates