Reviewer’s report

Title: Stressful life events and difficulties are associated with mental health symptoms and substance use in young adolescents

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Reviewer: Katy Robjant

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Overall I think this is a very good paper investigating an interesting area and has important clinical implications. The methodology, analysis and write up are thorough and I am only suggesting discretionary revisions:

1) The authors note in their discussion that they have found higher levels of stress than other studies and suggest that this may be because the sample are younger. It would therefore also be helpful to briefly refer to studies of rates of depression, conduct disorder and substance use in the general population for this age group to compare with levels of these problems found in this study, given that it is a non clinical sample.

2) The finding that stressors were related to variety of different mental health and substance misuse outcomes is very interesting - the authors suggest this may be due to a lack of coping skills in younger adolescents. Literature relating to use of coping skills and mental health problems / substance use could be helpfully referenced here.

3) The authors identify the use of different time frames as a limitation of the study. This would seem particularly problematic in relation to substance misuse (cannabis, alcohol and cigarette smoking having a past 6 month time frame whilst only illicit drug use had a lifetime time frame). I cannot see how illicit drug use was measured in the method section under study variables. Can this be clarified? The possibility of a failure to report illicit drug use at all if it hadn’t been used in the past six months could be highlighted, given the results for illicit drug use in this study.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests