Author's response to reviews

Title: "The association between stressful life events and depressive symptoms among Cypriot university students: a cross-sectional descriptive correlational study"

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dr Annemieke van Straten  
(c/o Rita Aguirre)

Journal Editorial Office  
BioMed Central

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Dear Dr. Annemieke van Straten

Re: Revised MS: 8678551299718690 (version 2) “The association between stressful life events and depressive symptoms among Cypriot university students: a cross-sectional descriptive correlational study”

We would like to thank the reviewers and yourself for taking the time to re-evaluate the above manuscript. We have now addressed all the additional comments and suggestions made by one of the reviewers (Daniel Johnson). Below, please find our point-by-point responses as well as relevant action. Corresponding changes are also highlighted in the manuscript. Finally, in the process of revising the article, we have made some other minor editing changes.

Thank you again for considering our manuscript for publication in the BMC Public Health.

Yours sincerely,

Sokratis Sokratous
Response to the reviewer comments:

Reviewer (3): Daniel Johnson

We were happy to see that the reviewer recognized the contribution this study makes to the literature on stress and depression and we would like to thank him, as well as the other two reviewers for their constructive comments. Like the reviewer, we feel that the article will be of interest to the readers of BMC Public Health. We thank the reviewer for the additional suggestions for minor and discretionary changes, which we have also tried to address. Indeed, as a result of the reviewers’ suggestions, the manuscript is lengthy at parts and we have now made an effort to cut back based on the reviewer’s suggestions, particularly in terms of the discussion on stress generation (see point 2, Minor revision below). Changes in the manuscript as a response to the comments of the reviewer appear highlighted in bright green in the revised manuscript.

Minor Revisions

a) Please review the places where you write “clinically significant depressive symptoms”. In some places you write “severe clinically significant depressive symptoms” which is not accurate, given that not everyone above 22 on the CESD has severe symptomology. Also, I would not add “(Major Depression)” after “clinically significant depressive symptoms” which you do in some places, because major depression implies a diagnosis of major depressive disorder, which the CESD cannot provide. In the Results section, there is also a spot where you write “mild to moderate depressive clinically significant symptoms” which must be a typo. Please revise.

Response:
We thank the reviewer for spotting this. We have now corrected all the relevant mistakes concerning ‘clinically significant depressive symptoms’ or “(Major Depression)” or “mild to moderate depressive clinically significant symptoms” throughout the manuscript.
b) In general, your additions to the text address the reviewers’ requests and enhance the paper. However, in a few places they are quite lengthy and make sections of the manuscript cumbersome. Two suggestions to reduce some text:

- **Discussion section** - The section on stress generation, although informative, seems a bit removed from the crux of your paper. While I definitely think you need to discuss stress generation, you can cut this section considerably, focusing on reviewing the stress generation literature that is most relevant to your paper and removing the rest. From my perspective, the main reason to include this topic is to acknowledge the limitation of your cross-sectional study (can't speak to directionality) and to put your results in the context of the stress-depression literature, which includes stress exposure research and stress generation research.

**Response:**
Indeed, this section was lengthy. Even though there is no work limit, we agree with the reviewer that the most important points to retain are (a) in terms of a discussion regarding the directionality of the association and (b) to put the results in context. We have now revised this section and have reduced the length considerably, framing the discussion mainly on the two points identified by the reviewer (please page 16).

- **Discussion section** - the sentence that starts with “In line with these findings, several measure of minor stress have…”. There is extraneous information here. I think it could be reduced to “In line with these findings, a large proportion of Cypriot students in our sample experienced minor life events like academic stressors, social stressors, and financial stressors, all of which may place these students at risk of depressive symptomatology.” Also, I think the next few sentences citing the Reyes-Rodriguez study could be moved to the section where you discuss gender differences- it seems out of place in this paragraph. Finally, the last section of this paragraph, discussing the results by academic year, should be reported in the results section, not the discussion.

**Response:**
We have addressed these three important points.
1) The original sentence starting with “In line with these findings, …” on page 14 of the manuscript has been replaced by the sentence as re-written by the reviewer, who we thank for the suggestion.

2) We agree with the reviewer. We had introduced the Reyes-Rodriguez study in this section, mainly in order to discuss differences in terms of academic year. However, we also feel that this was out of place. Hence we have now moved the discussion of the results in terms of academic year in the Results section as appropriate (see point 3 below).

3) The last section of this paragraph, discussing the results by academic year, is now reported in the results section of the manuscript (please see last paragraph, page 13).

c) Background- In the last paragraph before the “Aims” section, please include a citation after your discussion of problem focused coping possibly decreasing depressive symptoms. Also, the third sentence in this paragraph has “negatively” in it twice.

Response:
Following the reviewer’s suggestion, we have included a citation (see page 5 in the last paragraph before the “Aims” section). Additionally, we have now deleted the word “negatively” which appeared twice.

3. Discretionary revisions
d) Method - Data analysis section - when you discuss the CESD groups, it says “/60” after the score ranges. What does this mean?

Response:
“/60” referred to the maximum total score of the scale CES-D but we agree with the reviewer it is likely to be confusing for the reader, thus we have removed it.
e) Results section - “Frequency of reported life events” section- there should not be parentheses around “family get-togethers”.

Response:
This has been done (please see page 11 - Results section).

f) In the Limitations section- you write “- stress generation” after you mention stress exposure, which doesn’t seem appropriate to include.

Response:
In the Limitations section- the phrase “- stress generation” after “stress exposure, has now been removed (please see page 17 - limitation section).

g) Third paragraph of Discussion- “Concerning stressful life events on among university students…” should read, “Concerning stressful life events among university students…”

Response:
We thank the reviewer for spotting this. It has now been corrected.

h) Fifth paragraph of Discussion- a sentence currently reads, “There was a stepwise increase in the prevalence of clinically significant depressive symptoms in terms of increasing LESS scores and, in fact, the association appeared more robust when using the LESS score. We found a 3-fold increase…” which seems cumbersome. I would suggest it read, “There was also a stepwise increase in the prevalence of clinically significant depressive symptoms in terms of increasing LESS scores, with a 3-fold increase…”.

Response:
We now have re-phrased that part as suggested by the reviewer (please page 15).