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Focus Groups: Perceived Stress and Stress Management Techniques of Speech-Language Pathology Graduate Students

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Focus Groups: Perceived Stress and Stress Management Techniques of Speech-Language
Pathology Graduate Students

Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

Emily Karevold

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in
Speech Language Pathology

April 24, 2024

Moorhead, Minnesota

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Techniques of Speech-Language Pathology Graduate
Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the stress that occurred, and strategies used to alleviate stress during the first semester of Minnesota State University Moorhead Graduate Speech-Language Pathology Master program. Participants were assigned into focus groups of 3-4 individuals and asked open-ended questions and prompts regarding stress encountered during their time in the program but not exclusively related to course work and degree requirements. Students had the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings about stress experienced during their first semester of graduate school as well as efforts they used to manage stress. Focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed into typed statements for further analysis. The investigators formed themes and subthemes regarding the experiences shared by the participants. The participants may be invited to participate the following Fall to go through the same process described above during the beginning of the second year of study. This study added to the limited information available on the stress and stress reduction strategies experienced by SLP graduate students and could lead to further studies of a larger population of students.

Keywords: Stress, Speech-Language Pathology, Graduate Students

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Speech-Language Pathologists are required to earn a master's degree from an accredited program (ASHA, n.d.). Graduate students are prone to stress such as paying off undergraduate student debt, earning a sustainable income while completing school, and working on establishing a professional identity within their career field while completing their graduate degree (Cho & Hayter, 2020). These stressors are magnified by the stress associated with earning a graduate education, which may negatively impact their productivity and diminish their mental and physical well-being (Cho & Hayter, 2020).

Stress can be positive called eustress, or negative called distress (Um-e-Rubbab et al., 2022). Stress will be used throughout the paper as it is common usage to refer to distress. Stress can be defined as any change that causes an individual emotional, physical, or psychological strain (WHO, n.d.). High stress levels can impact individual's physical health and cause psychological distress such as anxiety, severe depression, insomnia, and social dysfunction (Beck et. al, 2015). High stress not only impacts an individual's health but also impacts the individual's academic productivity including their ability to conduct research, write, and publish papers (Cho & Hayter, 2020). Students are showing an increase in program dissatisfaction and a higher rate of leaving the academic program due to a lack of academic productivity caused by high levels of stress (Cho & Hayter, 2020). Continued stress may lead to decreased levels of commitment to the individual's professional career path or dissatisfaction with an individual's career choice overall (Cho & Hayter, 2020).

This study aims to explore how stress impacts individuals enrolled in Minnesota State University Moorhead's (MSUM's) Speech-Language Pathology graduate program. Data will be

collected in the form of small focus group interviews that involve individuals who are currently enrolled in their first-year graduate Speech-Language Pathology program at MSUM. This study will expand on previous research of graduate students enrolled in a speech-language pathology program. Previous studies focused on training students to use mindfulness techniques whereas this study will analyze how SLP graduate students are affected by stress and the ways they try to manage their stress during their first semester of graduate study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Stress

A recent study showed that stress can be used as a positive motivational force for some individuals, yet most research demonstrates that an increasing level of stress in academic environments is correlated with declining mental health and physical outcomes at all collegiate levels among both the faculty and the students (Cho & Hayter, 2020). Stress affects both the mind and the body, and a small amount of stress can be good to help motivate individuals to complete daily activities whereas too much stress can cause problems to an individual's mental health (WHO, n.d.). Positive stress that improves an individual's performance is known as eustress whereas stress that negatively impacts an individual is known as distress (Um-e-Rubbab et al., 2022). Stress is something that everyone experiences but the way that someone responds to stress can make a big difference in the overall health and well-being of that person (WHO, n.d.). Stress is considered to have three phases where the individual first becomes more productive and highly motivated; then, becomes exhausted and emotionally unbalanced; finally, the individual may become ill, and their thought process may deteriorate (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014).

Stress can make it hard for individuals to relax and cause a wide range of emotions like anxiety that may impact an individual ability to concentrate and focus on tasks (WHO, n.d.). When stress levels become too great for an individual it can affect that individual's physical health and cause psychological distress such as anxiety, severe depression, insomnia, and social dysfunction (Beck et. al, 2015). Stress can become chronic when it is not well managed and can cause a number of debilitating and life-threatening health conditions including

impaired immune system functioning; increased blood sugar, cholesterol levels, and triglycerides; weight gain; memory loss; and decreased bone density (Beck & Verticchio, 2014b). High levels of stress can also affect an individual's attitude and overall productivity (Beck & Verticchio, 2014b).

High levels of stress not only impact an individual's health but also the individual's academic productivity including their ability to conduct research, write, and publish (Cho & Hayter, 2020). Due to a lack of academic productivity caused by high levels of stress, students are showing an increase in program dissatisfaction and a higher rate of leaving the academic program they originally enrolled in. Continued stress may lead to dissatisfaction with an individual's career choice and a decreased level of commitment to the individual's professional career path (Cho & Hayter, 2020).

Common Factors for Stress

For most people, encountering stress is a reality of daily life. Stress ranges from simple items such as looking for lost keys or deciding where to eat to life-altering such as the loss of a job, the death of a family member, or a divorce (Beck & Verticchio, 2014b). Health professionals' education and training requires a lot of effort and causes a significant amount of stress in students that can be counterproductive (Pfeifer, et al., 2008).

Career Burnout

Burnout syndrome is considered an occupational hazard in education and health care due to stress caused by emotional exhaustion, decreased feelings of personal accomplishment, and disinterest in personal relations (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014). Since burnout typically takes many years to develop, it is more common in individuals who have been in the work field for a prolonged period of time and have greater work experience (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014).

Nobrega and Barboza stated that burnout syndrome “is a condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction of professional realization” (2014). There are four main viewpoints of burnout syndrome; clinical burnout caused by excessive work leaving the professional to care less about their own needs; sociopsychological burnout where the professional can no longer attend to their patients; organizational burnout where the professional becomes frustrated due to the repetitive nature of their work; and socio-historical burnout where the professional is no longer able to help others due to social conditions (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014). Burnout syndrome can also be caused by internal factors such as perfectionism, a need to help others, and high levels of ambition; and external factors such as contradictory instruction, lack of leadership and collaboration, and a bad work environment (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014).

The progression of burnout syndrome has four stages in which i) the professional has a lack of enthusiasm and is less willing to go to work; ii) the professional desires a change of employment and no longer maintains interpersonal relationships; iii) the professional's capability of completing work declines and psychological symptoms occur which may increase the consumption of alcohol; iv) the professional may become addicted to drugs or alcohol, and attempt suicide (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014).

Stress in the Field of Speech-Language Pathology

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) work with individuals of all ages and abilities in settings including schools, colleges, rehabilitation centers, long-term and residential healthcare facilities, private practices, and hospitals (ASHA, n.d.). The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, n.d.) defined a speech-language pathologist as an individual who is trained in professional practice in the areas of communication and swallowing; where communication includes language, fluency, cognition, hearing, voice, and resonance; and where

swallowing includes all aspects of swallowing and feeding behaviors. Many speech-language pathologists have hourly caseloads that far exceed those of other professionals such as a physiotherapist, causing higher stress rates due to the workload (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014).

Stress Associated with School-Based Speech-Language Pathology

Speech-language pathologists that work in a school setting may provide language therapy and other speech services to children who need help following directions and/or answering questions; collaborate with the clients' classroom teachers to develop a student's literacy skills, vocabulary development, and articulation or sound production of letters; or help develop an individual's job skills and transition into work for students with autism or other disabilities (ASHA, n.d). In 2009, there were approximately 96,000 speech language pathologists employed in the United States, and half of these SLPs were employed in a school setting (Harris et al., 2009). School based SLPs often encounter large caseloads that far exceed SLPs in a private setting and time limitations that cause high levels of occupational stress (Harris et al., 2009). Within a school setting in 2022, Speech-Language Pathologist encountered a case size ranging from 37 clients to 53 clients nationally (American Speech-Language Hearing Association, 2022). Harris et al. (2009) states that the average school SLP spends around 21.5 hours a week giving direct face to face service delivery within the 35-hour school week leaving very little time for the other responsibilities an SLP has like assessments, parent meetings, developing individualized education plans, and paperwork. Harris et. al (2009), sent surveys to 539 practicing school SLPs to evaluate their overall stress; 97 individuals participated in the survey. They found that increased caseloads, decreased pay, and lack of professional support significantly affected the stress levels of speech language pathologists.

Stress Associated with Medical Speech-Language Pathology

Speech-language pathology within a hospital setting allows professionals to work with individuals of all ages ranging from newborns to the elderly within all environments including outpatient care, inpatient care including specialty areas such as intensive care units, and neonatal care units (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014). Stress is considered a major health problem for those working in healthcare environments causing the highest rates of depression and anxiety leading to more substance abuse and higher suicide rates than other professionals (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014). Individuals working in healthcare settings commonly become stressed due to the long hours required of them, the shift work they are expected to do, exposure to infectious and/or dangerous substances and diseases, and the requirements of their professional role (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014). According to Nobrega and Barboza (2014), “burnout syndrome is a chronic adaptive disorder that affects a wide range of professionals, especially health care, such as speech therapists” (p. 985).

Graduate Student Stressors

“Approximately 80% of college students identify themselves as ‘moderately stressed’ or ‘burned out’” according to Beck and Verticchio (2014b, p. 25). During a medical student’s graduate education, they often experience an increase in depression and anxiety leading to burnout (Barbosa, et. al, 2013). College students encounter challenging stressors to cope with like learning to balance life and school, their independence, and navigating academic success (Bennett, et al., 2020). Graduate students, typically in their twenties and thirties, are prone to stress that arise while completing their graduate degree such as paying off undergraduate student debt, earning a sustainable income while in school, and working on establishing a professional identity within their career field (Cho & Hayter, 2020). This stress is magnified by the stress

associated with earning a graduate education, which negatively impacts their productivity and diminishes their mental and physical well-being (Cho & Hayter, 2020). According to Beck et. al (2015), graduate students in clinically oriented graduate programs like speech-language pathology and audiology might have higher levels of stress. This may be due to the transition from a typical educational setting to a more applied clinical environment, such as internships, clinical practicums, and part-time employment opportunities (Cho & Hayter, 2020). See Appendix A for MSUM SLP Graduate Program: Plan of Study Class of 2025.

Stress Reduction

Measures can be taken in order to avoid stress such as taking at least thirty minutes to relax per day and engaging in activities that relieve stress and bring enjoyment (Nobrega & Barboza, 2014). It to establish a daily routine when coping with stress, along with getting a minimum of eight hours of sleep per night, exercising regularly, eating healthy, and connecting with others (WHO, n.d.). Another method for managing stress is to maintain a record of when a stressful event occurs and the physical and/or emotional reaction that occurred due to the event in a stress diary or journal. By noting when a stressful event occurs and how the individual reacted to the event, the individual is able to begin tracking their stressful events and the situations in which they occur (Beck & Verticchio, 2014b).

Review of Quantitative Studies Relating to Stress of SLPs

Mindfulness Training

A study conducted by Beck and Verticchio (2014a) of twenty speech-language pathology and audiology graduate students enrolled in a mindfulness course found that a majority of the students wanted to continue practicing mindfulness after the class concluded because it gave them a sense of being calm, relaxed, grounded, and reduced stress. Mindfulness training can help

develop clinical skills, develop positive regard for others, increase self-esteem, empathy, and reduce fatigue and professional burnout (Beck & Verticchio, 2014a). The development of mindfulness may increase an individual's counseling skills and sense of wellness thus, directly and indirectly, benefiting the clients (Beck & Verticchio, 2014a). Mindfulness can be developed by attending to actions that are often done automatically such as turning off the lights, brushing teeth, and eating a snack. Committing five to ten minutes a day to practicing mindfulness (Beck & Verticchio, 2014a). Mindfulness can also be developed through yoga, a mind-body practice that facilitates mindfulness by improving an individual's awareness of their body, increasing concentration, and can clear the mind (Beck & Verticchio, 2014a).

Breathing techniques have been shown to develop mindfulness and decrease overall stress. A flight or fight response can be elicited by an individual voluntarily increasing their breathing rate whereas an individual voluntarily slowing their breathing can calm the mind and elicit a relaxed nervous system (Beck & Verticchio, 2014a).

Barbosa et. al (2013) also explored mindfulness-based stress reduction in a study of 16 college students enrolled in a full-time healthcare program at Samuel Merritt University in Oakland, California in which participants were required to attend an 8-week Mindful-Based Stress Reduction Training program. This program taught stress reduction techniques such as meditation and awareness to mindful thinking in everyday tasks. The course was instructed weekly in a 2.5-hour session plus an additional 8-hour retreat of silence during the 6th week. The study provided evidence that MBSR decreased anxiety among graduate healthcare students (Barbosa, et. al, 2013).

Yoga

People often carry stress in their bodies, especially their back, chest, shoulders, neck, and face (Beck & Verticchio, 2014b). Yoga physical postures can help reduce the physical stress on the body by using stretching and strengthening techniques (Beck & Verticchio, 2014b). This increases an individual's flexibility and can leave them with a sense of being relaxed, calmed, and refreshed (Beck & Verticchio, 2014b). Random controlled trials of yoga showed that yoga was effective in improving back pain, increasing overall energy levels, and an improved sense of well-being (Beck & Verticchio, 2014b). In a study conducted by Beck & Verticchio (2014b), 27 speech-language pathology master program students were enrolled in a weekly yoga class while 23 were used as a comparison group; they found that eighty-one percent of the students enrolled in yoga stated that it was helpful in managing their stress. Students completed a Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) at the beginning of the course and were assigned stress management techniques to complete one time a day five days a week for one month (Beck & Verticchio, 2014b). All the student participants in Beck and Verticchio's (2014b) study partook in a stress management unit and a time management unit. The students were divided into two groups where one group (1a) completed a 6-week yoga course and the other group (1b) did not participate in the yoga course. After the 6-week period both groups (1a) and (1b) completed the PSS. Over the next 6-weeks group (1b) participated in the yoga course and group (1a) did not participate in yoga. Once that 6-week period was over, the students took the PSS for the third time. Beck and Verticchio (2014b) found that the PSS scores of the individuals who participated in the yoga classes were significantly lower than after the 6-week period than they were before the yoga classes indicating that yoga may be an effective method of lowering an individual's perceived level of stress.

Qualitative Studies

Studies of Graduate Students in Related Fields

A study that surveyed 645 college students at all levels of their degree completion with open ended questions across three Midwest University campuses conducted by Kaler et. al (2021) found that stress can be caused or increased due to a lack of clear expectations and timeliness of communication from course instructors. Scheduling, setting goals, taking short breaks, and other time management strategies are all ways to reduce course related stress and improve mental wellbeing (Kaler, et al., 2021).

Schure, et al. (2008), found similar findings in their four-year qualitative study where first- and second-year graduate students in mental health counseling or marriage and family counseling took 15-week mindfulness-based stress reduction courses and kept a reflection journal about what they had learned that was later analyzed. The course met in person twice weekly for 75-minutes of mindfulness practice and included assigned readings and journal writing exercises alongside four required 45-minute sessions per week practicing conscious relaxation outside of class. Students who took this course indicated that they noticed physical changes in their bodies including increased flexibility, strength, and balance; positive emotional changes and an increased ability to deal with stressors; and changes in their mental state such as being more aware to their surroundings (Schure, et al., 2008). Students also stated that the course affected their therapy practices and allowed them to become more comfortable with silences, became more attentive to their therapy process, and changed how they viewed therapy (Schure, et al., 2008). Most students indicated that the mindfulness class could be applied to their profession and the idea of incorporating specific techniques learned would benefits clients going through the therapeutic process (Schure, et al. 2008).

Sarkar, et al. (2020), conducted a study they described as qualitative with 481 medical school graduate students who completed a questionnaire related to the stress they encountered while in graduate school. Participants completed a questionnaire exploring their thought of stress encountered due to the medical program they were enrolled. Nearly half of the participants found that medical school was excessively stressful, and more than four fifths thought that some action should be taken to reduce stress related to their education. Sarkar, et al. (2020), stated that medical students who have been overwhelmed with stress were unable to perform their duties and that stress management should be incorporated into the medical training program.

Tarrasch (2015), conducted a study using qualitative analysis for nine educational counseling and ten special education students enrolled in a graduate program. These students enrolled in “Meditation: Theory, Research, and Practice,” a two-semester practicum course in which participant enrolled. The course was structured with a ten-minute discussion of the students experiences the previous week followed by a 60-minute lecture on the beneficial effects of meditation for adults and children. The last 20-minutes of the course was used to teach one or two mindfulness techniques aimed to enhance a student’s ability to recognize their thoughts, emotions, and reactions to challenging situations. After the conclusion of the first semester, the participants completed a six-hour retreat to practice the learned techniques. The second semester consisted of the participants teaching the learned techniques to a small group of children. Tarrasch (2015), found that the participants were more present to their inner experience, felt calmer due to meditation practices, and became more compassionate towards themselves and clients.

Schwind, et al. (2017), conducted a study of fifty-two undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in nursing, child and youth care, and early childhood studies. At the beginning

of each of the students' respective classes during weeks four through twelve, the students were invited to participate in a brief mindful breathing practice. At the end of each class period, students were invited to participate in meditation and asked to complete five to fifteen minutes of mindful breathing four to five times a week. Students were asked to provide feedback at the end of the semester through individual or small group interviews. The participants agreed that they were able to focus better during class following the start of class mindfulness. Schwind, et al. (2019), found that undergraduate and graduate students who participated in mindfulness practice reported decreased anxiety and stress.

Leslie, et al. (2021), interviewed 9 graduate nursing students addressing the student's perception of stress related to their academic program. Leslie, et al. (2021), found that the participants regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, number of dependent or marital status, experienced overwhelming academic-related stress. Predominately high stressors indicated by the participants included an increasing workload with limited time, deadline expectations, and prolongation of grading assignments. Leslie, et al. (2021), found that students experience excessive academic related stress when completing their thesis due to a poor relationship with their research supervisor and untimely communication from their ethics committee. Leslie, et al. (2021), states that faculty need to explore strategies to reduce the causes of academic stress within graduate students.

Studies Related to SLP Graduate Students

Rapillard, et al. (2019), explored eight graduate speech-language pathology students' learning styles, motivators, stressors, coping strategies, and explored how they influenced their training. The eight students were required to participate in an interview at the beginning of each semester, resulting in each individual participating in six total interviews. Rapillard, et al. (2019),

analyzed the interviews and concluded that the eight participants preferred a combination of hands on and visual learning styles and that they were generally motivated throughout their time in the program. Participants used social supports from peers and faculty to cope with stressors related to graduate school along with problem based coping skills such as completing assignments ahead of time. Rapillard, et al. (2019), suggested that graduate programs should allow for clinical scaffolding where students are allowed to independently complete clinical assignments with structured rules still in place.

Conclusion

Based on the literature reviewed it appeared that there is limited research on stress within SLP graduate students. Further research would be beneficial to identify the factors of stress encountered during the SLP graduate program and what can be done by the students and programs to help manage stress. In addition, a current study would potentially reveal stressors that are relevant at the current time, including but not limited to: social justice, post-pandemic, and a poor economy. The present study seeks to explore these issues and strives to answer the following questions: How has stress impacted first year SLP graduate students? How are first year SLP graduate students implementing efforts to manage stress?

Chapter 3

Method

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of stress on graduate speech-language pathology students and the strategies used to reduce stress. The participants discussed the types of stress reductions strategies they used to manage stress during the first semester of the graduate Speech-Language Pathology program.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to gather information from the participants on how stress impacted their lives and the different type of coping mechanisms they used. The phenomenological design attempts to investigate experiences of individuals and interpret them (Emiliussen, et al., 2021). This design was carried out through face-to-face open ended interview questions for the first-year graduate students enrolled in the Minnesota State University Moorhead's (MSUM) Masters in Speech-Language Pathology program. The students were assigned into focus groups of three to four individuals. A focus group consists of a small group of people possessing certain characteristic and provides qualitative data within a focused discussion to help understand the topic researched (Krueger & Casey, 2015). According to Kruger and Casey (2015), "subjects tend to disclose more about themselves to people who resemble them in various ways." Focus group's main goal is to collect data of interest to the researcher and find opinions from a range of people across the groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus groups work well when exploring feeling, perceptions, ideas, products, services, or opportunities (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus group interviews were the most appropriate

method due to the researcher's intent to explore the shared experiences of stress in MSUM Graduate Speech-Language Pathology students.

Participants

The inclusion criteria to participate in this study was first year graduate students enrolled in MSUM's Masters in Speech-Language Pathology program.

Recruitment

The graduate researcher and primary investigator carried out an approximately 15-minute-long informal presentation in SLP 601, Research Design in Speech-Language Pathology, in which all potential participants were enrolled, in September 2023 to share the effects stress can have on the body and resources available through the MSUM campus many of which are already routinely shared in the SLP graduate handbook and advising. See Appendix B for contents of training. A description of the study followed, and participants were invited to participate. See Appendix C for description provided to the students. The entire first-year graduate class was invited to participate in the study via email shortly after the presentation (see Appendix D for email content). The students who express interest in participating in the study received information on the informed consent process (see Appendix E for informed consent). Students received scheduling information for the focus groups that took place in November of 2023.

Data Collection

Data was collected through open-ended interview questions (see Appendix F). The researchers asked follow up questions such as "let me know more about that" or "can you expand on that" for more in depth answers and clarification. After the participant has agreed to join the

study, they were asked to complete the informed consent and demographic information through a paper copy when they arrive for the focus group.

Pilot Interviews

A pilot interview was conducted on September 25th, 2023, with second year MSUM graduate students in Speech-Language Pathology. The pilot interview will be used to assess the clarity of the questions and provide practice for the interviewers. The responses from the second-year graduate students will not be analyzed for the study. No changes to the questions appeared warranted however it was helpful to the researcher to practice the process and follow up questions.

Demographic information

Pertinent demographic information was collected from the participants including age, gender, undergraduate degree discipline, if they identify with an underrepresented group in the field of SLP (Black, indigenous, and people of color; first generation college student; and low socioeconomic status), relationship status, and whether or not they are a caregiver for children or other individuals. The individuals also had the option to disclose if they had a current diagnosis or had been diagnosed in the past with any mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression (see Appendix G).

Participant interviews

Interviews with participants were conducted approximately two thirds of the way through their first semester. Participants were placed into focus groups where the student researcher took notes on the conversation and record the interviews audio using a digital recorder. The participants met one time in a private area within the university department for the interviews. The primary investigator did not participate in the interviews and coding for the participants was

used so the primary investigator could not link the comments to an individual. It was determined that this would provide anonymity for participants as the primary investigator was their instructor and advisor. Bottled waters were offered to the participants during the interview.

Analysis

Trustworthiness

Full transcripts of each focus group were typed out word for word to show all prompts given by the researcher and all responses from the participants to ensure credibility. A summary was composed from these transcripts for the participant to review. The participants each received a separate email asking them to review a summary of the transcript of the main ideas that were shared during the interview with their group for accuracy and asked to add any additional information they may have missed to ensure the confirmability of the transcripts.

Data Analysis

Krueger and Casey (2015) stated that the classic analysis strategy is systematic and identifies themes into categories (p. 312). The classic analysis strategy consists of cutting the transcripts apart and grouping them into common themes that answer the research questions (p. 314). After participants reviewed the summary of their focus group discussion and had the opportunity for comments to be clarified or expanded on, the transcripts were updated and then cut apart and grouped into commonly found themes that answer the research questions asked during the interviews. The graduate researcher and primary investigator analyzed each commonly found theme and further identified subthemes and key quotes that appeared during the focus groups.

Chapter 4

Results

Participants in the study shared personal experiences related to stress encountered during their first semester enrolled in the Minnesota State University Moorhead's Speech Language Pathology Master's program. The data from the focus groups was analyzed for common themes that emerged during discussion with peers during the focus group. Direct quotes from participants are included in quotations.

Students Perceived Stress Directly Related to Graduate School

Stress related to graduate school was emphasized by all participants throughout both focus group interviews. Three participants stated that they started experiencing stress about graduate school before they had even started the program. "Post Bacc is different because I like did not try very hard in my first degree, so I had to maintain a very, very high GPA in undergrad. Like I pretty much had to maintain a 4.0 GPA to get in, so it was very stressful." Another participant stated "I remembered the months going to the [acceptance into graduate school announcement]. I couldn't sleep at night just thinking about getting in [to graduate school]." The third participant commented "oh yeah, I like cried. I didn't want to think about where I was going to move to if I didn't get in, you know to MSUM."

Not enough perceived stress leads to a poorer performance

Participants in one focus group brought up the idea that a lack of stress can lead to a poorer academic performance and less preparedness for assigned tasks. Participant one stated "The swallowing [exam] we all hyped it up, I thought was going to be so hard and then the Neuro [exam] we didn't hype up, so I didn't study so hard, so I didn't do as good as I did on the other one... Because I wasn't stressed about it."

Feeling overwhelmed

One participant stated “going into graduate school I feel like none of us had really anything to expect, like you get your first week plan of everything and you know you have clients and like we don’t know what to do. So that first week was really, really bad but then after that first week I feel like it has coasted out a little bit like for me at least.”

Six of seven participants commented on feelings of being overwhelmed with one participant stating “sometimes I feel paralyzed when there is so many things on my to-do list like I don’t even know where to start... The sensation of being so overwhelmed that I can’t even pick a starting point.” Two other participants in the same focus group agreed with the previous statement made by another participant adding “it is overwhelming when we get like an assignment every single week like three times a week, but it is also not due for like a month and then I just don’t know how to like manage all of them at like the same time.” Another participant commented “I feel like my biggest stressor is just being so busy.”

Participants in the other focus group also brought up the feeling of being overwhelmed stating “All of the little assignments... some are bigger assignments, but I feel like it’s just like the amount of assignments plus like your one client... You want to do well on all of them, so you want to put like good amount of time into them so like all the little things are just like adding up to be a lot.” The remaining participants agreed and added “the forever to-do list, it’s always there, it doesn’t go away.” Another student added “or it’s like you when I take one thing off of my to-do list, but I’ve added four more.”

Feeling behind

Additional distress added by school was the “feeling [of] behind compared to others.” The participants stated, “sometimes people are working on stuff and you’re like I didn’t even

think about working on that yet and then that starts stresses you out.” Another participant stated, “I really get stressed when I go in the prep room [a secured room for graduate students to prepare for clinical sessions and work on homework] and listen to everyone else.” Other participants added that the stress “increases my procrastination” and “if there is an assignment due the next day, I’ll do it but if it’s like two months ahead I’ll forget about it.”

Stress related to academics

Five of seven participants alluded to feelings of distress due to academic classes. Participants in one focus group commented on the amount of presentations that they had been assigned to complete for classes and that the lectures can become “boring” if they are not interested in the topic. One group also mentioned the continual addition of assignments as an added stress stating “you see the ones on the syllabi and then you’re like okay I can prepare for that and then [assignments] are thrown at you... we might get another assignment to add to our to-do list, to feel more anxious about time management and when you’re going to do stuff. I hate when they throw assignments out there.” Another common theme was the feeling of having to cram all the information you need to know for the two days you need it then “squeezing a sponge out” during the exam.

Stress related to clinical assignments

Four participants stated that “clinic is its own category of stress” including feelings of “I don’t know what I’m doing.” Two participants stated they do not get what they need from their supervisor; “my supervisor just comes straight into the room after my session and is like ‘sooooo’ and then she’ll just like talk about what went well and what she would change... but for me I’m more of like a visual and example based person where she just says well I would do this, this, and that next time and sometimes it just goes straight over my head or I’m like I have no

idea what she just said to me.” Another participant stated, “some days I don’t get [SOAP notes] until like 7pm and then I’m like okay.”

Behavior management was also brought up as a distress related to clinical placements. One participant stated, “the behavior management side of it, I don’t know why I never thought that would be an aspect, but it is, and I feel like we don’t have enough classes on like how to manage [behavior].” Another participant added “maybe it’s like the boundaries too, like can I grab him, can I you know, and maybe it’s just within, [because] we don’t have a lot of guidelines on what we are able to-do.”

Another participant commented about gaining rapport “that’s the big thing here, once we get to know them, they’re gone.” A third participant commented “I wish we could have clients longer than a semester, some of them would really benefit from having the same clinician for longer period of time or at least some of the materials.”

Along with on-campus clinical assignments the groups mentioned the upcoming distress they are expecting for their off-campus placements. One participant stated, “most of the time we are doing most of the work, I hate to say it, but we are, you know they’re there giving us tips and I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Another participant added “even at minimum wage would be great, you know, like pay me eight dollars an hour at least I’m not making zero.”

Stress related to working as a Graduate Assistant

Two of the participants worked as graduate assistants within the Speech Language Hearing Department underneath one of their professors or clinic supervisors. The graduate assistants stated, “we are both GAs so I feel like a lot of the time it gets hard to distinguish school work from work [because] then I feel like I’m always here like should I be doing my school work or should I be going to talk to [my supervisor] to see if she has something for me to

do so I can get work done or should I be focusing on school... we don't have like a set schedule [for work].”

Some Participants Reported Healthier Levels of Stress Related to the Graduate Program

Participants commented on the positive effects that stress had on their academics.

Eustress

Four of the seven participants agreed that they had an acceptable level of stress during their first semester. One participant stated, “it is stressful, but I feel like it’s not, not doable, everything feels doable so far.” Another participant agreed stating, “I guess a lot of it, it’s not hard, it’s more just like busy work but I feel like I’m constantly busy, constantly have stuff to do but it’s not stuff I’m unable to do.” Another participant stated, “I’m still working like 40 hours a week like getting all my stuff done.”

When asked how stress positively affects the participants they responded with “pushes us to be better,” “improve time management skills,” and “I do work better under pressure so then it helps me in that way.” One participant stated “in comparison to undergrad, I’m like way less stressed in Grad school... Now it’s just like I just have to get an 80%. You know, it’s terrible to say out loud but as long as we pass and show we have the skills you still finish grad school. Like the end game is just to you know get your C’s or whatever so you obviously have to pay attention and do well, but you don’t have to stress quite so much.”

Positive effects of in-person classes. All first-year graduate students at Minnesota State University Moorhead are required to attend classes in person during the duration of their first semester in the Speech-Language Pathology program. Attendance for classes was stated to be a positive experience due to the “social aspect” and “productivity.” One participant stated that they

often used the short period between classes to “get most of my stuff done” and another participant stated that they “chit chat [and] get things done” during and between classes.

Positive effects of clinical placements. Four students stated that working in the on-campus clinic was a positive experience for them. “I feel like [clinic] is positive for me [because] then I’m like reminded of why I’m even here in the first place. [Reflecting afterwards] is fun too [because] I’m like oh my gosh, why’d I do that. I don’t make that mistake twice.” Another participant stated “I think a positive stress of clinic is like, there’s just so many deadlines, like [my supervisor] is a 24 hour before 24 hours after type of thing. Like I need to have my lesson plan done 24 hours before the session and I need to have my soap note done within 24 hours of it finishing and I really like that because it holds me accountable of like going home and like doing them. It’s usually the first thing I work on.” That participant continued to state “it feels more like natural learning now. Like before I was just trying to learn it so I could do well but now were just like naturally acquiring the skills that we need, and it feels a lot less rushed for me at least.” Two additional participants agreed that the clinic felt more natural when learning.

Two participants stated that previous experience helped relieve additional stress when working in the on-campus clinic and facing possible behaviors. “I didn’t know how to deal with neurotypical kids... I’m used to the physical abuse and stuff... I’m just used to behaviors; I have a little guy that actually comes here for speech.”

Completing graduate assignments on campus facilitated success

Four of the seven participants agreed that completing work on campus has benefits including, socializing, accountability, and relief from feeling behind. This was contrasted with other participants as noted above, who stated completing work on campus led to increased stress. When talking about working in the prep room, one participant stated “it’s a good stress reliever”

another stated “you do relieve my stress sometimes when you’re like I didn’t even do that yet, and I’m like I did. Then [I feel like] okay I’m on the right track.” A third participant stated “I go in there to know what assignments I need to do and then I go out of the prep room and get some done. Then I go back in [to socialize].”

Positive balance of stress while at work. Six of seven participants stated that work had positive benefits that helped with their stress. One participant stated, “Sometimes I like work though because then I don’t have to think about school and like its enjoyable [because] like you get to hang out with your clients and get to have fun.” Another agreed stating “yeah, I like work. I don’t think about school for those four hours or whatever and sometimes school applies with work. You know, sometimes I get to take my clients to speech and stuff so I can kind of learn.” Another student stated, “also [I’m] away from the people at school, like you get to go to a new circle for a while.”

Graduate Students’ Stress Affected all Aspects of Their Life (Holistically)

All participants stated areas of their lives outside of academic courses and clinical placements that were impacted by stress.

A feeling of a lack of time caused distress

All seven participants stated that they felt some form of a lack of time caused them distress “I just feel like I’m always stressed, no matter what I’m doing or where I’m going it just feels like there is something always in the back of my head that like I’m thinking about.”

Another participant stated, “I feel like it’s just trying to find the time to-do the things.”

Lack of time was linked to a decrease in personal care. Four of the seven participants stated that they are lacking in some form of personal maintenance due to the feeling of a lack of time. One participant stated “ I definitely have been slacking in some of my at home tasks like

keeping the bathrooms clean and maintaining stuff around my apartment and I'm just like eh... we don't have to do that this week and I'll push it aside or like my boyfriend will pick up the slack on that too so I feel like we used to be pretty even and like he does most of those things like I don't know the last time I did laundry like he does it all of the time."

Two participants commented on the effect of meal preparation, one stated "like it comes time to cook dinner and like I just don't have the energy for this right now." Another student commented that her license plate had been stolen and she stated "I don't have time to go to the DMV... just like a lot of outside things that happen outside my life, like little things. I feel like it's a little impact, but it just hits me so much harder like I don't have time to do that."

Feeling of not getting enough done due to lack of time. Five participants alluded to the feeling of not getting enough done causes them more stress. One participant stated, "I just feel like when I don't achieve those things that's when I'm most stressed out like I should have been able to get this, and this done off my to-do list today." One participant stated, "if I have a little homework, it's not going to get done after nine [because] my brain shuts down."

Psychosocial effects of distress

Psychosocial factors were a common theme among all participants impacting both relationships they held with others and themselves. Two participants stated that all areas of their life were impacted by stress and one participant stated that stress impacted their "work, life, and school balance."

Stress affected a sense of self. Six of the seven participants had a negative response when undergoing distress. Two participants stated that distress affected their mood "I feel like I get a little agitated quickly so [my partner] would probably say [my mood]." Another participant

agreed, stating “Yeah, I would say my mood. I make a bigger deal out of [little problems] and it’s not like a big deal.”

Two participants stated that they felt down on themselves when they did not get the tasks they were wanting to accomplish completed. “I’m the person where I feel like if I don’t do something throughout the day, I like hate like feeling like I did not accomplish stuff throughout the day.” Another added “[when] I don’t get something done and I wasn’t able to cross it off then I feel bad. The saddest part is when you have to move it to the next day. I’m like loser.”

Three participants agreed that not being able to go out with friends “correlates into your mental health... you’re isolating yourself because I don’t have any money and then it just spirals, it’s kind of like a feedback loop, you know, it just keeps happening.” Three participants also stated that they “feel guilty and more stressed” when not working on homework. “I guess like feeling guilty, I feel like I should be doing homework and not actually be watching TV right now or like I try to do both and like that just doesn’t work.”

Three participants alluded to the feeling of being unqualified during a clinical session or feeling as though they were not providing services that were beneficial. “I would say sometimes lesson planning for my client [is stressful] because he has pragmatic goals so it’s not like self-explanatory articulation. Like I struggle with coming up with things for that so I get stressed about that because I want to make sure he’s benefiting but it’s hard when I can’t bring in like [his] friends to the clinic so we can do group... Sometimes I get stressed about that. Like coming up with new ideas like that.” Another participant stated, “clinic can be a negative stress if you feel like you’re not doing the right thing for like the feedback is like try implementing this and you thought that was a great session.”

Three participants commented on feelings of being judged by supervisors and other clinicians while completing assigned clinical work at clinical placements. “I feel like the professors are judging me sometimes... I’d rather just have them straight up if I’m doing something wrong... I feel like I’m trying to help the client but I’m doing more not to make me look good, but I want them to know that I’m trying you know, I just don’t want them judging and then they talk with other professors about me behind my back... Like you did one thing wrong and they’re all like, [because] they’re all so close knit, the professors, I feel like they all just like gossip on the weekends about us.”

Distress impacted social aspects

All participants commented on the effects of distress and their relationships with friends, family, or significant other and their ability to keep up with their share of daily living chores within their households.

Atypical irritability. Four participants commented on how distress caused them to become irritated easier and lash out at people when they typically would not. “[my boyfriend] would definitely say that I get irritated a little bit more like with the little things. For example, I made knoephla soup a little while ago and he didn’t pour it into the Tupperware correctly and I was really upset and he was like ‘oh my gosh, what’s the big deal’.” Another participant stated, “sometimes it’s just your mood and then you like snap at your roommate and it’s like oh sorry like it’s not about you.” A third participant stated “my [partner] definitely gets the most brunt of everything in all of the areas so I guess like marriage wise... I’m sure there’s days where he’s like wow this lady needs to leave the house.”

Feelings of guilt. Three participants indicated that they feel guilty when someone else completes their chores or when they do not complete them in a timely manner. “That could be

another stressor that I have too sometimes where I feel like my roommate is cleaning a lot and I'm like I'm sorry, but I do not want to get home and empty the dishwasher, like that's the last thing I want to do so then I feel bad [because] like I look like a terrible roommate." Another participant commented "my [partner] has picked up so much slack, which I'm grateful for."

Not wanting to interact with other individuals. Three participants stated that when they were finally home at the end of the day they did not want to interact with other people. "I've been talking all day and like I just don't want to talk anymore and like sit in silence." Another participant commented that distress affected "just like my personal time, like not feeling like I have a lot of, like some days not feeling like I have a lot of my own say in what I'm doing to do because I'm like I would like to be able to, I don't know, play a game or read but I actually get home and I'm like I'm just going to watch TV and do nothing or like be on my phone."

Impacted relationships. All the participants alluded to their personal relationships being impacted due to stress encountered during graduate school. "I would say it's not necessarily stress related, but it would add more stress. Like we're older we've been married for a while and my [partner]'s at the point where he wants kids and I'm unwilling to because of the stress. It would add to the stress that I already have so it's like in turn making this difficult between us because he's like I don't understand, why don't you want to and I'm like I have no time like plus I'm not going to be working in like 6 months so how are you going to afford everything. So, then it's just like back around again type of thing." Another participant stated "I would say like the amount of time that you have just like relationship like they notice it. Obviously because I used to hang out with them more so something and now I can't. it's straight in their face."

One participant agreed stating "I would have to agree with my relationship, like we're not fighting but he's in college too and I feel like we both at the end of the day are just drained and

like yeah. I'd like to go out on dates and just do like fun stuff, but I don't have A the money or B the time where we have to plan it and to like do stuff." Six of the seven participants stated something related to quality time was diminished due to distress. When they were able to spend some quality time with loved ones, a participant stated, "you're always thinking and it's just hard to switch that off."

Uncomfortable with brief relief of stress

Three participants implied that a lack of stress made them uncomfortable during their free time. The participants conversed stating "some days I feel like I have less things to do but I feel like I should be doing something... like I don't give myself that time to relax like I feel like I should be doing something." Another participant replied "yeah, like you're used to filling your time so when you have free time you're like okay, I feel uncomfortable."

Personal time had consequences. Two participants alluded to the fact that when they make time for themselves, they ended up paying for that time later. One participant stated "you choose what you value, like some Saturdays I'm like I'm not doing any homework I'm going to go to my friend's house or whatever or I'm going to lay on the couch all day and not do a single thing but then it bites you in the butt on Sunday when you have to like catch up on all these things." Another participant commented "or feeling guilty when I'm not doing something that is not school or making money related. So that's like what are you doing your wasting your time." The same participant stated that building in time for herself "positively affects me getting ready in the morning. I love that time [because] I set up a little show on my iPad. I drink my coffee, skipping around the apartment and then it's like 8:15 and I'm like [I'm running late]."

Finances

When asked about the top two or three sources of stress for the participants during their first semester; six of the seven participants stated that money or financial status was one of the top stressors encountered. Stress factors that related to finances included car troubles, paying rent, and having money to be able to go out with friends or partners for dates. Participant two stated “I feel like all of my stressors stem off of [money]... I got in [to school] in all these other places and so I was freaking out, so I was like how am I going to afford to live? [My partner and I] also own a house, so I was like how do we afford to pay our mortgage when I’m not even here?” Another participant stated there is “money to get by and then money when your friends like want to grab a drink and then it’s like okay I can’t go” affecting the participants ability to build and maintain relationships due to their lack of excess funds to enjoy time out with friends. One participant stated, “I haven’t been home this semester [because] like it’s 140 bucks to get home with gas, yeah and then you get home and you want to see all your friends and they want to go out and get food or it’s just so, so expensive.”

Health insurance

Health insurance closely linked to financial stress for two participants who fell outside of the average age range of the overall participants due to the need to find insurance on their own. Student three stated “I have to get my own health insurance and that’s been really difficult because I moved states so Minnesota’s like nope you don’t qualify, and North Dakota is taking a long time to get back to me so that’s been stressful.” Whereas Participant two stated “I’m older so I have health insurance and stuff like that so I have to keep working like 30 hours a week to maintain my health insurance so just things that wouldn’t normally be thought of for like a 23-year-old or 24-year-old person.” These additional stressors were not commented on by participants who fell under the age of 26 years old.

Employment issues

All participants in both focus groups mentioned that work caused some form of extra stress. A common theme between focus groups was that work took time away from school so they were unable to work the desired hours that they would typically work. Student one stated “you can’t totally, can’t work as much maybe 10-15 hours a week at most before it becomes too much on your plate.”

Two students stated that the only distress they received from working was the time it took away from schoolwork. One student stated, “I feel like the only stress about [work] is we’re not doing homework.” The other student stated, “I probably get stressed that it’s taking time away from me doing my homework or like doing my other job but then I feel better because I’m like getting paid to do this.” Another student stated “[work is] negative, I guess it’s just that some days I don’t want to go to work because I just have too much stuff to do... I could be using my time better.”

Previous diagnosis of mental health disorder

Of the seven total participants, five identified themselves during the demographic questionnaire as having a current diagnosis or having been diagnosed in the past with a mental health condition such as anxiety and depression. Two participants mentioned a previous diagnosis of a stress related disorder during the focus groups. Participant two (P2) stated “I’m medicated... I take anxiety medication so I used to [stress about every little thing and] I started losing executive functioning skills, like I couldn’t remember anything... just from being so stressed. Now I don’t have that happen anymore... I was purely just stress related.” While another participant in the same focus group stated, “I feel like I stress about every little, tiny thing about my life all day.”

Moving

Two graduate students who had not previously lived in the town that they attended school mentioned moving as a contributing factor of their distress in their first semester of graduate school. Participant four (P4) stated “I moved in the beginning of the semester so that was definitely stressful because I was thinking about that and my new dynamic with my roommates and grad school on top of that.” The other student mentioned difficulty becoming familiar with the area and settling in.

Participants identified strategies to address stress

A number of strategies were mentioned including working on campus, positive attitudes, looking to Speech-Language Pathologists on social media. One student stated, “I just have to plan out my days... to get things done.” Another participant mentioned that they relied on assistive technology to help with housework. “I literally have a robot vacuum, I have a robot mop, I literally just set it off when I need it done because I don’t have the time.” A third participant stated, “making sure I get decent sleep helps with [stress] too.” Other participants agreed that “eating is the best part of [their] day.” Three participants mentioned they meal plan “I try to do that [because] the days that I don’t have a meal plan then I eat like chips and salsa for dinner.”

Decompressing

Decompression was a common theme across all participants though it took form in many different ways. For one participant they decompressed by playing with their dog while another tried to “start their day off with something right.” One participant stated, “I like to cook... there’s usually four or five people over for supper every night, I just like to cook.” Two participants stated that self-care was important to them. “I have a pretty detailed nighttime routine that also is

a de-stressor for me, it's my skin care." Five of seven participants stated that exercise was a decompressor for them. "When I get home usually the first thing, I do is I like exercise or like go to the gym or like exercise I, my room. I just feel like I need to like decompress form being on campus and then it just like makes my mindset better like going back into school." Another participant stated, "I get up at 5:10 every morning to go to the gym... then I feel like I start my day off and I accomplish something in the day like right away." Three participants stated that they take time for breaks in their day "I just take like the night to like do my own thing." Another student stated that it is important to recognize "when there are breaks and taking that break and just relaxing."

Making lists

All seven participants mentioned that they used some form of a to-do list to help them know what they need to get done. One student stated they "keep a very detailed calendar and I like to be able to physically cross things off of my calendar after they have happened, that's how I plan my assignments, that's how I plan work... I look at it every day and it like keeps me in line and calmer." Other participants agreed with the previous statement and added "I need to feel like okay you did this, this, and this today so I can feel less stressed. Another participant stated "I make a to-do list with the due dates on it so I can figure out what is priority... I literally color code it like red is due first... that has helped with the stress." To which another participant replied "I agree with the check list definitely, the beginning of the semester I was just like trying to remember things in my head which was not a good strategy so then I bought a planner but that was just not working for me so like keeping a list just on my laptop screen that has each class laid out and then what's due first in each class that's definitely helped and then I can see what's due first in each class." A third participant replied "Yeah, I just use like a page of notebook

paper, and it has every class and then what is due with the due dates listed behind it, and I have like another column of just like remember to submit my [clinical] hours.”

Timely completion of assignments

Three participants stated that they were motivated by the limited time between classes to work on homework because “I just try to crank it out [because] I usually stop doing all school related stuff by 5 pm at the latest.” Another participant stated “I feel like positive stressor is like the limited time between classes or like in between clinic. I feel like it helps me get work done because I know I only have this much time throughout the day to do it.” Another student commented “if I feel motivated [I] definitely do homework, especially if it’s like a quick do this before next week. I try to crank it out, so I don’t even have to write it on my to-do list.” Along with getting things done some participants stated that they work ahead. “I think I was really anxious and stressed out for that first exam... so I definitely started studying way in advance just to make sure I wasn’t super anxious about it leading up.” Another participant stated “if I see a due date, like once a professor assigns a due date, like if I have the time now to do it, might as well get it done now so I don’t have to stress about it next week when it’s due. So, I don’t have that last minute when it’s due, like once it’s assigned if I can do it, I’m going to do it.”

Positive attitude

Three participants stated that their attitude affects their ability to complete tasks. One participant commented “I have a rule if I’m not going to be mad about it tomorrow then I’m not going to let it bring me down right now type of thing, so I just try to like move on so it doesn’t affect my interactions with everyone else. Two participants stated that they try to keep their school, work, and personal life balanced. “I try to keep it at school, if I’m stressed at school keep it at school, home life keep it at home.”

Positive effects of being at home

Three participants agreed that being at home was a positive part of their day. Some found the comfort of their own home to have a positive impact on their ability to complete tasks. One participant stated “getting home is a positive, even if I’m surrounded by things that need to get done. I’m just like in the comfort of my own home. [I do] homework if I’m in my comfy clothes on my little couch with a snack and a drink. My feet are up and I’m watching TV... recently that’s been a great source of happiness.” Another participant commented that they like to be home because “if somebody’s home than I feel like I have to be productive but if no one is home then I’m like I could just watch TV.”

Working on campus

Two participants stated that working on campus helped improve their productivity. Being on campus allows the students to ask questions about assignments and find out what is due in the next few days from the other students. One student stated, “I just like get way more done on campus that I do at home on my desk.” One participant stated that “I get distracted here but like if my roommate is home, I’m getting nothing done.”

Utilizing sources from social media Speech-Language Pathologists

Three of the seven participants stated that they use social media platforms to see different techniques that Speech-language pathologists use during treatment. “A lot of the sites I’m going off of is like Teachers Pay Teachers or just videos... a lot of times that’s what you’re supposed to be doing but it’s just SLPs its not evidence based so you can’t use it. But I feel like TikTok, I don’t know I mean it’s good.” Another student agreed stating “honestly, I get a lot of stuff off of like TikTok.”

Chapter 5

Discussion

This study answered the research questions, “How has stress impacted first year Speech Language Pathology graduate students?” and “How are first year Speech-Language Pathology graduate students implementing efforts to manage stress?” The information shared by the participants provided a vast array of input for analysis three major themes were mentioned during the study.

Stress in school.

An overarching theme mentioned by all seven participants during the research was distress related to school and coursework. Feelings of being overwhelmed or distressed due to coursework were mentioned by all participants. Cho and Hayter (2020) during their systematic review of stress and its impact among graduate students stated that stress which is magnified by academic stress such as course work diminishes mental and physical well-being. Causes of distress related to graduate school mentioned during the focus groups conducted were feelings of being overwhelmed, the possibility that more assignments may be added that were not written into the syllabus, and not getting what they needed from their professors in regard to feedback and preparedness. Kaler et al., (2021) found that an increase in stress can be linked to a lack of clear expectations and timeliness of communication from course instructors.

Clinical placements were also mentioned by all seven participants as a cause of distress with one participant stating, “clinic is its own category of stress.” In the Beck et al. (2015) study using yoga as a stress reduction technique they stated that graduate students in clinically oriented programs such as Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology have higher levels of stress possibly due to the transition from a typical educational environment into a more applied clinical

environment. Causes of distress mentioned during the focus groups related to clinical placements included feelings of being unqualified, lack of confidence in relation to behavior management, and completion of clinical paperwork.

Stress can have a positive effect on performance in school.

Cho and Hayter (2020), stated that stress can be a positive motivational force for some individuals. This was mentioned by some of the participants in the focus groups. Stress positively affected participants to “be better” and “improve time management.” Um-e-Rubbab, et al., (2022) stated that positive stress that improves an individual’s performance is known as eustress whereas stress that negatively impacts an individual is known as distress. Some participants in this study seemed to be closer to eustress than distress stating they work better under pressure and that time management skills were improved. Classes were noted to be positive due to the social aspect of the courses and the productivity of time between class periods. Other benefits that participants mentioned included clinical placements reminding them of why they were in school, previous experience relieving stress, benefits of socialization, and accountability from others on campus.

Stress impacted all areas of life.

A common theme mentioned during the focus groups by all seven participants was that stress impacted all areas of their life including psychosocial factors that were not necessarily related to school. According to Beck et. al, (2015) stress can impact an individual’s physical health and mental wellbeing possibly causing anxiety, depression, insomnia, and social dysfunction. All seven participants alluded to these aspects when discussing psychosocial factors affected by distress. A lack of time was mentioned as a factor of stress by all seven participants

affecting personal care such as cooking, cleaning, “life things” like going to the DMV, and not getting enough done in one day to feel satisfied.

Psychosocial factors that were mentioned during the focus groups included feelings of self-deprecation, isolation, being unqualified to perform their service, and being judged by others. This relates to the phenomenon known as imposter syndrome or the feeling of being inferior despite the individual’s accomplishment and experience (Wright-Mair, et al., 2024). All participants commented on how relationships were impacted due to distress. Some participants noted that they became easily irritated and felt guilty when partners or roommates completed their home tasks. Feelings of pressure between partners, amount of quality time, and not wanting to socialize after a long day were all stated when talking about the effect of stress on personal relationships.

Participants also stated that a lack of stress made them feel uncomfortable and when they did take time for themselves, they often had to “pay” for that time later. Major areas outside of graduate school that caused stress were finances, outside employment adding to stress and taking time away from school, finding health insurance, and relocating to the area.

Strategies

Many strategies were mentioned by participants, but few of the specific strategies found in the literature review were noted. Beck and Verticchio (2014a) found that mindfulness training can help develop clinical skills, positive regard for others, increased self-esteem, empathy, and reduce fatigue and professional burnout. No participant mentioned mindfulness which can be developed through yoga (Beck & Verticchio, 2014a) and meditation (Barbosa, et al., 2013).

Participants may have partaken in these activities, but they were not specifically mentioned nor

asked to elaborate so a direct comparison to the literature was unable to be made. An indirect comparison could be made related to using a form of exercise as a technique to reduce stress.

Nobrega and Barboza (2014), stated that taking at least thirty minutes to relax per day and engage in activities that relieve stress and bring enjoyment may help avoid stress. All participants stated that they have some form of decompression including working out, playing with a pet, showering, completing a nighttime routine, or watching a show. The World Health Organization (n.d.) stated that getting a minimum of eight hours of sleep per night, exercising regularly, eating healthy, and connecting with others are ways that someone can decrease stress levels.

Another strategy noted by all participants was the use of some form of to-do list. Kaler, et al., (2021) found that scheduling, setting goals, taking short breaks, and other time management strategies were all ways to reduce course related stress and improve one's mental well-being. Three participants stated that they were motivated during the limited time between classes, and they used that time to complete homework. Participants also stated that their attitude affected their ability to complete tasks, so they tried to maintain a positive attitude during the day. Maintaining a positive attitude may be indirectly linked to mindfulness but was not directly referenced in the mindfulness-based studies by Beck and Verticchio (2014a); Barbosa, et al. (2013); Schure, et al. (2008); Schwind et al., (2017); or Tarrasch (2015).

Another strategy that was identified was socialization within and between classes in addition to using that time to complete assignments ahead of scheduled. Rapillard, et al. (2019) stated that participants use social supports from peers and faculty to cope with stressors related to graduate school. Rapillard, et al. (2019) also suggested that clinical programs should allow for

students to complete clinical assignments independently with structured rules still in place. This was not mentioned by any of the participants as an option during their graduate course work.

Strengths of Research Design

Multiple attempts were made for recruitment of participants to ensure saturation of themes was achieved during the focus group discussions. Multiple focus groups were conducted, and both interview questions and a shared activity were used to provide opportunities for triangulation by the use of several methods and collection of different perspectives.

The study upheld integrity of the data by recording the focus groups and transcribing them word-for-word to show all prompts given by the researcher and all responses from the participants to ensure credibility. The participants were given a summary of the focus group and asked to review it for confirmability of the transcripts. The data was reviewed with systematic analysis procedures and thoroughly analyzed by two researchers. A systematic analysis is documented and understood by each research team member and can be verified if the data can be analyzed by another researcher and a similar conclusion is found (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Recurrent patterning was documented through analysis and coding of the participants statements. The qualitative research design was effective in exploring the experiences of the participants thoughts, feelings, and attitudes towards stress encountered within their first year of graduate school.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was that all participants were enrolled in their first year of the Minnesota State University Moorhead's Speech-Language Pathology Master's program resulting in all perspective coming from one school experience. First year graduate students were exclusively selected due to the researcher being enrolled as a second year in the MSUM SLP

graduate program. Another possible limitation of this study would be that the participants were not asked to expand on what type of physical activity they participated in when exercising which made it difficult to compare their responses to the literature reviewed especially those that explored specific techniques such as yoga or mindfulness techniques.

The researchers acknowledge the potential influence of prior experiences, assumptions and beliefs on the research experience, The primary investigator has had years of experience with graduate advising and the stresses shared by past students may have influenced the interpretation of the data. She also experienced the first year of graduate school like the participants did, and that might have influenced analysis. The student researcher was a second-year graduate student in the Minnesota State University Moorhead Speech-Language Pathology master's program, so she had experienced a similar plan of study the year prior. The researcher invited the first-year graduate student cohort to limit influence of both the participants and the researchers as the two parties had no previous interaction since the primary investigator was on sabbatical and was not advising or teaching this cohort during the semester of study and the student researcher was placed at an off campus clinical assignment. The researcher prompted the focus groups conversations with questions, but the participants facilitated conversation amongst themselves.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study provided information about experiences of first year Speech-Language Pathology Master students enrolled at Minnesota State University Moorhead. A longitudinal study or a continuation of this study with the same participants in future semesters would be beneficial to show how stress evolves throughout the participants' experience in the program.

More research in this area would be beneficial due to the large population of graduate students enrolled in Speech-Language Pathology, and the limited research conducted.

Further research in this area with a broader survey of the population of graduate students from multiple Speech-Language Pathology programs would be beneficial to provide more information on how SLP graduate students encounter stress and the strategies that they use to reduce stress. Future studies that would be beneficial would include studies on specific stressors and ways to relieve stress such as paid off-campus internships. Another beneficial study would be interviewing multiple first year graduate student cohorts over a number of years.

A future study could analyze data from qualitative focus groups from students across different geographical regions and interview them before their program, during each semester of their program, and one time following the program to gain better insight on how stress evolves during their time in their program and a final interview looking back on the stress they encountered during the completion of their degree. Potential future studies to better understand students' needs from clinical supervisors would be beneficial. This could be done through focus groups asking specific questions related to clinical assignments and ways that stress for students could be reduced by professor and supervisor feedback.

Conclusion

This study shared first year graduate students enrolled in the Minnesota State University Moorhead's Speech-Language Pathology Master's program experiences and encounters of stress related to school and outside factors. The information outlined in this study gives other graduate students and professors insight into how stress impacts the work, social life, and psychosocial well-being of students.

It can be concluded from this study that distress experienced during graduate school affects all areas of an individuals' life and not just the aspects directly related to school and clinic work. Continued research of stress related to Speech-Language Pathology Master's programs and strategies used to mitigate stress is needed to educate students on the effects that stress may cause and provide advice to implement strategies.

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Appendix A

MSUM SLP Graduate Program: Plan of Study Class of 2025

Example of Track I: REGULAR TRACK: Minimum requirement: 55 credits. Student has

fully completed undergraduate background courses (neuroanatomy, statistics, aural rehab, etc.).

Coursework/clinic is completed in the summer between year 1 and year 2. *Added detail provided in italics.*

Year 1:

FALL	SPRING
601 (2) Research Design in SLP	621 (2) Seminar: Cleft palate & Phonological Disorders
623 (2) Seminar: Voice Disorders	631 (2) Pediatric & Adult Motor Speech Disorders <i>[dysarthria & apraxia]</i>
630 (3) Adult Neurogenic Language Disorders <i>[Aphasia; Right Hemisphere Dysfunction; TBI]</i>	642 (3) Augmentative and Alternative Communication
646 (1) Clinic	646 (1) Clinic
647 (3) Diagnostic & Appraisal Procedures	682 (2) Seminar: Social & Cognitive Correlates of Communication Disorders <i>[autism; social communication disorder, etc.]</i>
SLP 690 (2) Swallowing I <i>[normal swallow; adult swallowing disorders]</i>	695 (1) Portfolio (Plan B) OR 699 (1) thesis
	<i>(2) SLP 690 Swallowing II [peds swallowing; advanced adult swallowing; MBSImP, etc.]</i>
Total: 13 credits	Total: 13 credits

Year 2:

SUMMER	
Required	624 (2) Seminar: Stuttering and Related Fluency disorders, offered online
	646 (4-6, usually 4) Clinic (On or off campus)
Total:	6-8 would usually be 6 for all (unless unusual clinical tracking for some approved reason).

FALL	SPRING
627 (2) Communication in Normal Aging and Dementia	SLP 675 (2) Seminar: Professional Issues in SLP, offered online

<i>SLP 690 (2) Contemporary Issues in Language and Literacy Intervention, hybrid</i>	SLP 690 (1) course title TBD, remaining credit to replace SLP 683, offered online or hyflex
646 Clinic on or off campus (4-6), usually 6 for all, unless unique clinical tracking)	646 Clinic on or off campus (8)
695b (1) Portfolio (Plan B) or 699 (2) Thesis (Plan A)	695c (1) Portfolio (Plan B)
	(699 (1) Thesis), Plan A, if applicable
Total: 11-12 credits (11 if portfolio; 12 if thesis student)	Total: 12 cr.

N. Paul updated 04/24

Appendix B

Contents of Training

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Emily Karevold. I am currently a second-year graduate student here at MSUM working on my thesis. I am very interested in the topic of stress experienced by students within the SLP graduate program. This year I am continuing my actual study: Qualitative focus groups of SLP graduate students on this topic. My literature review has been accepted to be presented at the ASHA conference in Boston, MA.

What is stress:

Stress can be defined as:

- Eustress: the positive stress that can improve an individual's performance.
- Distress: stress that negatively impacts an individual.

Advantages and disadvantages of stress:

- Eustress can be beneficial, motivating individuals and make their work performance higher
- Distress causes physical and emotional effects on the body such as increased anxiety, high blood pressure, and a lack of motivation.

Examples of ways to reduce stress:

- Campus resources

Hendrix Clinic & Counseling Center, (218) 477-2211

- Offers counseling services in person, over the phone, or virtually.

Academic Success Center, (218) 477-4318

- Offers tutoring to students.

Women's Center, (218) 477-4973

- Provides couches, snack, crafts, and socialization for students.

Wellness Center, (218) 477-4300

- Offers a variety of group classes, and massage/relaxation chairs.

What is involved in participation:

- Qualitative research using small focus groups.
- Aims to identify the ways that stress impacts individual's daily life and ways that students address those stressors.
- One meeting the week of October 20th approximately 30 min in length.
 - Asked to discuss a few open-ended questions in small groups.
 - Responses will be analyzed to find common theme.
 - Potential to participate during your second year of the program.

Follow up:

- I hope that all of you will consider participating.
- I will follow up with an email next week to see who is interested. If you are interested a prompt reply is appreciated.
- Focus group schedules will be released after the response period has closed on October 1st.
- You are welcome to change your mind about participation at any point during the research.
- By participating you will receive firsthand experience of qualitative research and the field of SLP and future SLP graduate students may potentially benefit from the results.

- Your participation will remain anonymous and not affect your standing in the program in any way.

Appendix C

Description of Study

I am currently a second-year graduate student here at MSUM working on my thesis. I am very interested in the topic of stress experienced by students within the SLP graduate program. I am working with Dr. Paul and plan to do qualitative research using small focus groups. This study aims to identify the ways that stress impacts individuals' daily life while completing the graduate Speech-Language Pathology program at Minnesota State University Moorhead. We would meet in a private area of the department and talk about stress through a few open-ended questions. The groups would last around 30 minutes. I would then analyze the responses and compile the information to find common themes across all the participants. Results would be anonymous and confidential. We will follow up with an email to see who is interested in participating in my research. I hope that many of you will consider this. The study will be conducted using focus groups of four-five people. This will consist of one focus group meeting in November of 2023, with a potential to continue the study during the second year of the program for those who would be interested in doing so. [Dr. Paul is interested in following up on her own or with a future thesis student, so considering writing the IRB proposal to include this second phase of the study, but Emily would not be involved as that as graduates this spring].

Appendix D

Email Contents

Hello,

I am reaching out to all first year Speech-Language Pathology Graduate Students here at MSUM to offer the opportunity to participate in a qualitative study on stress and the strategies used to reduce stress. I appreciate being able to talk to your SLP 601 class about this recently.

This study aims to identify the ways that stress impacts individuals' daily life during the first semester of graduate school in Speech-Language Pathology at Minnesota State University Moorhead. The study will be conducted using focus groups of four-five people. This will consist of one focus group meeting in November of 2023, with a potential to continue the study during the second year of the program if you would choose to do so.

I would appreciate your response below by October 1, 2023.

I would like to participate.

I would prefer not to participate.

I have further questions before I decide if I would like to participate.

Thank you for your consideration,

Emily Karevold

MSUM SLP graduate student

Appendix E

Informed Consent

Please read this consent agreement carefully before agreeing to participate in this study.

Title of Study: Focus Groups: Perceived Stress and Stress Management Techniques of Speech-Language Pathology Graduate Students

Purpose of the study: The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of stress on graduate speech-language pathology students and the strategies used to reduce stress. The participants will discuss the types of stress reductions strategies they use to manage stress during the first semester of the graduate Speech-Language Pathology program at Minnesota State University Moorhead.

What you will do in this study: Participants will be assigned into focus groups of 4-5 individuals and asked open ended questions that discuss the effects of stress encountered during their time in graduate school. Focus group sessions will be recorded by the investigators. A summary of the focus groups main ideas will be emailed individually for the participants to review and add any additional comments that may have been missed.

Time required: This study will consist of one meeting during or close to the week of October 20th, 2023 approximately 30 minutes in length. The graduate students will be invited to participate in a second focus group if they chose to do so, in mid October of 2024.

Risks: Participating in this study includes no more than minimal risk, and may include discussion of stress related feelings with others in a similar group of participants.

Benefits: No monetary compensation will be provided. Potential benefits include experience participating in research and expanding the knowledge of the Speech-Language Pathology field. Bottled waters will be offered to the participant during the interview.

Confidentiality: All identifying information, demographic information, informed consent, recordings, observation notes and results will remain confidential.

Participation and withdrawal: There are no costs for participation in this study. Participation is exclusively voluntary and there are no consequences for not participating. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time if they choose to do so.

Contact:

Principal Investigator: Nancy Paul, Ph.D, paulnan@mnstate.edu, Minnesota State University Moorhead, Speech Language Hearing Sciences Department

Student Investigator: Emily Karevold, karevoldem@mnstate.edu, Minnesota State University Moorhead, Speech Language Hearing Sciences Department

Whom to contact about your rights in this experiment: Nancy Paul, Ph.D, Principal Investigator, Minnesota State University Moorhead, Speech Language Hearing Sciences Department. paulnan@mnstate.edu, 218-447-4642, or else you may contact Dr. Robert Nava, Chair of MSUM Institutional Research Board, at irb@mnstate.edu, or 218-477-2699.

Agreement: The purpose and nature of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time and my

withdrawal will not affect any future relationship with Dr. Nancy Paul or the Speech-Language Pathology program.

In signing this agreement, I also affirm that I am at least 18 years of age or older.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____

Appendix F

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What ways has stress positively affected you this semester?
 - a. Can you provide more detail
 - b. Could you elaborate
2. How has stress negatively impacted you this semester?
 - a. Can you provide more detail
 - b. Could you elaborate
3. What in your life caused you stress during this semester?
 - a. Can you provide more detail
 - b. Could you elaborate
 - c. I'm interested in a little more detail. If I asked what were 2 or 3 of the top sources of stress for you this semester, what would they be?
4. What strategies did you use to eliminate negative stress this semester? How effective were these strategies?
 - a. Can you provide more detail
 - b. Could you elaborate
5. What areas of your life are affected by stress?
 - a. If we were to ask someone close to you, what would they say are areas in your life that are affected by stress
 - b. Can you provide more detail
 - c. Could you elaborate

6. For this question, we need someone to volunteer to write down a list on this paper. I want each of you to walk yourself through your typical day while in graduate school. What were positive and negative aspects that came to mind as you reflected on your typical day?
7. Is there anything else you would like to bring up about stress or ways to deal with stress that we have not had the chance to discuss yet?

Appendix G

Participant Demographic Table

Students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender							
Male						X	
Female	X	X	X	X	X		X
Older than 24							
Yes				X			X
No	X	X	X		X	X	
Undergraduate Degree Discipline							
Speech Language Hearing Sciences	X	X			X	X	
Other- Post Bacc			X	X			X
Relationship Status							
Single						X	
Long-Term Partner	X	X	X		X		X
Married				X			
Caregiver for anyone besides self							
Yes							
No	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Underrepresented Group							
Yes							X
No	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Current diagnosis of Mental Health Condition							
Yes			X	X	X	X	X
No	X	X					