

The Effect of Imagined Support on Perceptions of Stress

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Introduction

Background

- Social support helps individuals to be less reactive to stressors (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996).
- In times when support is not available, stress can be exacerbated, and it can be beneficial to internalize representations of attachment figures (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016).
- The purpose of this project is to identify whether imagining supportive touch, imagining emotional social support, or imagining the act of giving social support is best at moderating stress, shown through measures of perceived stress.

Research Question

- Will the type of imagined social support moderate the effects of a stressful situation?



Method

- Participants (N=58; 90% Women; 60% White; 16% African American; 12% Hispanic; Age $M = 22.6$) completed initial measures of perceived stress, social support, and personality (used as covariates) and were assigned to one of four conditions:

Describe ways that your loved ones have touched you physically to make you feel supported. How might they support you if they were here

Describe ways your loved ones have expressed feelings of empathy and acceptance towards you. How might they support you if they were here now?

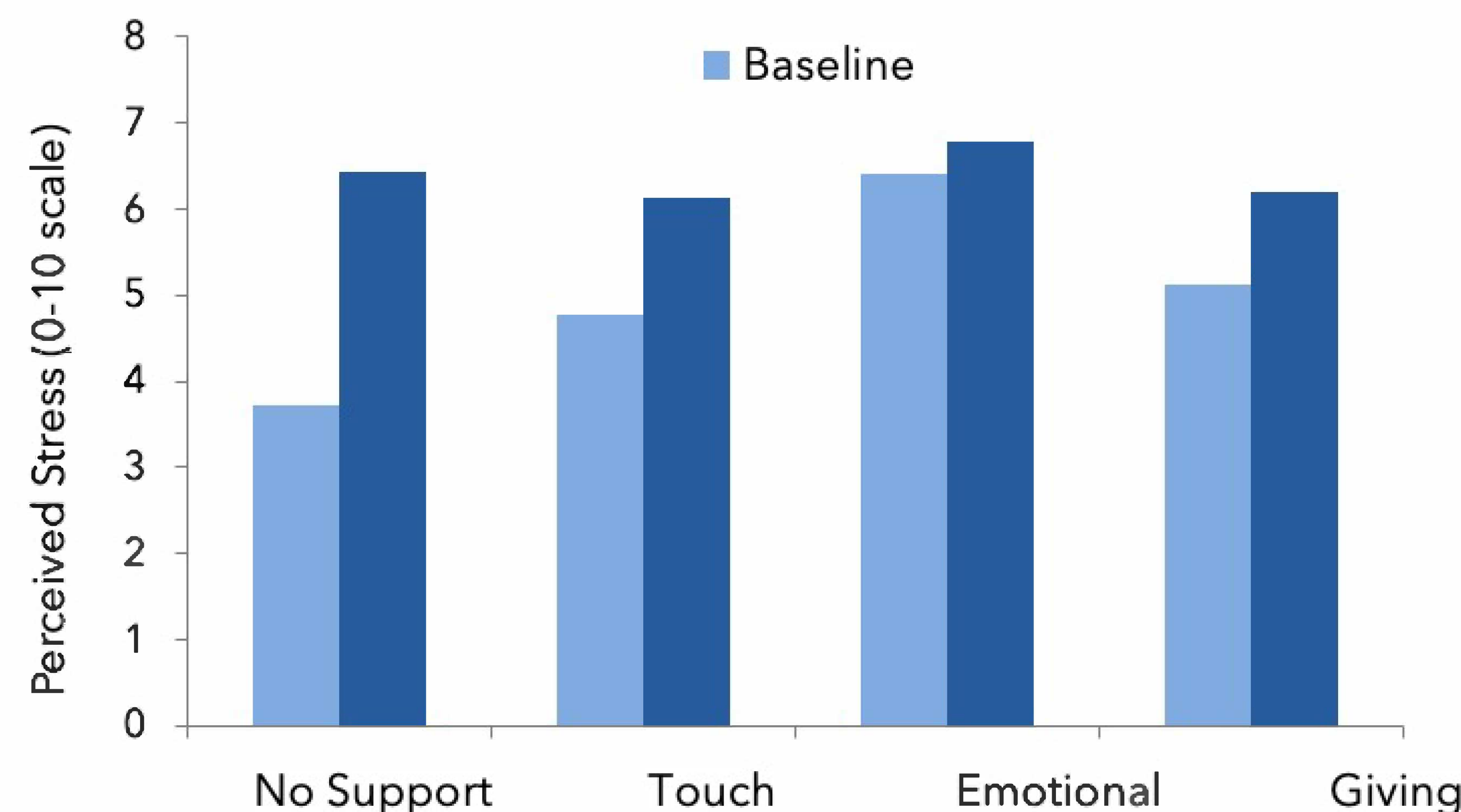
Describe ways you have given support to loved ones. How might you provide support to a loved one if they were going to do the same task?

Recall and describe the function and appearance of a printer. (Control)

- Stress was manipulated using the Trier Social Stress Task (TSST), which was conducted over zoom.
 - Speech task- Mentally prepare and present a 5-minute speech
- Subjective stress was measured at baseline, after the support manipulation, and after the stress test.

Results

Change in Stress by Social Support Condition



$F(3,50) = 1.78, p = .16$

Results Continued

	Baseline Stress	Task Stress	Task Difficulty
Social Support	-.26*	-.19	-.29*
Neuroticism	.03	.36*	.37*
Life Stress	.14	.22^	.21

Discussion

- Imagined social support did not significantly affect changes in perceived stress.
 - However, the greatest increases in stress were observed in the control condition.
- Greater social support in one's life was associated with less stress during the study and lower perceptions of task difficulty.
- Greater neuroticism was associated with greater perceptions of stress and difficulty.
- General life stress was marginally related to greater task stress.
- More data is needed to fully test the potential benefits of imagined social support.

Limitations

- Sample was small and composed of female students.
- Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, trials were conducted over Zoom. Consequently, extraneous variables could not be controlled for.
- Baseline stress levels were likely elevated due to the nature of the study being online during the pandemic.

Future Directions

- Add additional time point to see when people get back to their baseline after being given a stressful task.
- Complete the task post-pandemic to examine pandemic's impact on stress levels in common