

2013

## Developing the College Student Stress Inventory for Black Women (CSSI-BW)

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### Recommended Citation

Brown, April L. and Blankson, Nayena (2013) "Developing the College Student Stress Inventory for Black Women (CSSI-BW)," *Papers & Publications: Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 2 , Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/papersandpubs/vol2/iss1/5>

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According to Ross et al. (1999), college students are particularly vulnerable to stress, as they are actively adjusting to a newfound level of independence and an overall new environment. During this transitional period, college students are often expected to maintain academic excellence, adjust to a new social life, establish a sense of autonomy, adjust financially, maintain familial relationships, and pursue goals (Brougham et al., 2009). While adjustment to change and personal growth are necessary for the successful transition from adolescence into adulthood, they are often accompanied by psychological stress. Previous studies have even demonstrated sex differences, asserting that college women encounter more stress than their male counterparts, as issues of frustration and academic pressure are more prevalent for them (Brougham et al., 2009). Many people struggle against the daily pressures of life, but for college students, pressure in the academic setting may result in poor performance as stress has deleterious effects on information processing (Sandi & Pinelo-Nava, 2007).

Since stress is believed to be a detriment to academic performance and emotional health (Alzaeem et al., 2010), a number of researchers have analyzed college student stress levels in order to identify effective coping strategies (e.g. Brougham et al., 2009). For many of these studies, stress has been measured using tools like the Impact of Event Scale (Horowitz, Weiss, and Zilberg, 1982), the Stress Appraisal Measure (SAM; Peacock & Wong, 1990), the Student-life Stress Inventory (SSI; Gadzella & Bologlu, 2001), and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Karmack, & Mermelstein, 1983). Though the psychometric properties of these instruments have been reviewed as relatively reliable and valid, they should not be used as measures of stress in student populations who are disproportionately affected by the environment, namely Black college students. According to Greer (2008), when it comes to the attainment of a college degree, Blacks are faced with disproportionate economic, social, emotional, and psychological challenges (p. 60). Therefore, there is a need for a specialized tool for measuring stress in this population, especially among Black college women.

The aim of the present research was to validate the College Student Stress Inventory for Black Women (CSSI-BW), a gender and culturally specific measure of stress. This test is needed because current measures of stress inadequately reflect the way in which general college stressors and minority status uniquely overlap for Black college women. It is hypothesized that the CSSI-BW is an appropriate measure of stress in Black college women. The CSSI-BW's psychometric properties will be examined via item analysis, internal consistency reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity. In order to reveal why the CSSI-BW is an appropriate measure of stress, it is first necessary to analyze contemporary definitions of stress, current stress scales, and their properties..

## **Defining Stress**

Theorists have proposed a range of models for stress, both psychological and physiological. Stress has been broadly defined by Alzaeem, Sulaiman & Gillani (2010) as the “non-specific response (different physical and chemical responses) of the body to any demand on it” (p. 239). A useful theoretical framework for stress is that of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which explains the development of stress in terms of the individual and her response to the external environment. According to the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), it is the result of an imbalance between an individual's resources and conflicts in the

environment. If some aspect of the external environment is perceived as a threat to well being and the individual has limited means of approaching the problem effectively, then stress is produced.

Generally, the most common element across all of the different conceptualizations of stress is the focus on the environment. People maintain constant interaction with their surroundings. It is therefore not surprising that definitions of stress reflect response to discrepancies in the immediate environment. An individual's psychological well-being is largely dependent on her sense of comfort in and compatibility with the environment. In the absence of this compatibility, there are emotional consequences. Therefore, for the purposes of the CSSI-BW, the term *stress* is defined as the measure of how often emotional strain, tension, or worry occurs as the result of undesirable events in the environment.

### **Overview of Existing Measures of Stress**

Horowitz et al. (1982) developed the Impact of Event Scale to examine responses to stressful life events. For the Impact of Event Scale, response to stress is measured in two dimensions: intrusion and avoidance. Individuals who score higher on the intrusion items of the test are said to be aware of their stress and more likely to have "unbidden thoughts and images, troubled dreams, strong pangs or waves of feelings, repetitive behavior" (Sundin & Horowitz, 2002, p. 206). Conversely, individuals who score higher on the avoidance items are said to use unconscious stress mechanisms and are more likely to have "ideational constriction, denial of meanings and consequences of the event, blunted sensation, behavioral inhibition...and awareness of emotional numbness" (p. 206). The Impact of Event Scale has not been as widely used with undergraduate students as some of its competitors, but the measure has been used extensively for the evaluation of individuals who have experienced traumatic events.

However, other instruments have been more commonly used to measure for undergraduate populations (Peacock & Wong, 1990). The Student-life Stress Inventory (Gadzella & Baloglu, 2001), however, was designed especially for college students. The 51-item self-report inventory measures stressors and reactions to stress in college students in nine areas, including Frustration, Conflicts, Pressures, Changes, Self-imposed, Physiological, Emotional, Behavioral, and Cognitive. The most widely used measure of stress in college students, however, is the PSS (Cohen et al., 1983). Originally a 14-item scale, the PSS now has two versions, one with four items and one with ten items. The PSS was designed to measure perception of stressful situations in college students, as students are asked to indicate the degree to which experiences are considered stressful. Yet, despite established validity and reliability (Cohen, 1994), the PSS may not be a universal tool of measurement for stress in all college students, as the test's norm group is largely White ( $N = 1924$  of 2387) with very little Black representation ( $N = 126$  of 2387).

Researchers have examined the experience of Black students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) versus Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), and findings suggest that stress levels vary considerably. Studies have consistently shown that Black students encounter issues of racism and isolation at PWIs, but Allen (1992) asserts that Black students observe general acceptance and support from HBCUs (as cited in Greer, 2008). Many of the

studies evaluating the experience of Black students investigate differences in achievement and cognitive factors (e.g. Nettles, Thoeny, & Gosman, 1986), but few studies have been designed to accurately examine stress in Black college women. There has been an attempt, however, to develop a psychological instrument that will assess stress in Black women in general, and it is called the African American Women's Stress Scale (AWSS; Watts-Jones, 1990).

Watts-Jones (1990) conducted a qualitative study in which stressors for Black women were elicited through a series of interviews. Findings revealed several common stressful situations for Black women, which included inadequate resources, relationship conflict/dissatisfaction, loss or disappointment, and personal health—stressors that are not commonly addressed in the most popular stress scales. The AWSS was then developed to include this range of issues for Black women. The identification of these stressors was a huge stepping-stone toward effectively evaluating stress in Black women, but there is a paucity of empirical psychological study that focuses on Black college women. Since there has yet to be a precise instrument for measuring response to stress in academic life for Black women, the College Student Stress Inventory for Black Women (CSSI-BW) is proposed. The CSSI-BW is a group-administered test that should be used in order to comprehensively assess response to stress in Black female college students.

## Method

### Sample and Setting

The CSSI-BW was conveniently administered to a Theory of Psychometric Instruments class at a small all-women's institution in a large southern metropolitan city (N = 39). To avoid the inclusion of nontraditional college students, age limit was restricted to Black college women between ages 17 and 24. Nontraditional college students have been excluded on the premise of previous research that has equated entering college with transitioning into adulthood (e.g., Ross et al., 1999; Brougham et al., 2009). Though some of the stressors of traditional students and non-traditional students may overlap, there are likely to be substantial differences among types of stressors as nontraditional students may have families or stable jobs.

### Measures

*Stress:* Each participant was administered the initial paper-and-pencil version of the CSSI-BW, which evaluated two dimensions of response to stress. The first section of the test addressed stress susceptibility. Examinees were asked to answer questions regarding how often they experience emotions that are associated with stress, such as worry, uneasiness, and lack of control, where 0 = *never*, 1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *frequently*, and 4 = *always*. The second section of the test assessed current stress level. This section of the test incorporates stressors identified in the Watts-Jones (1990) study, which identified situations that Black women find stressful. Examinees are asked to indicate how stressful they have found situations like discrimination, increased responsibility, financial troubles, or graduating from college. Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert scale, where 0 = *not at all stressful*, 1 = *a little stressful*, 2 = *somewhat stressful*, 3 = *moderately stressful*, and 4 = *very stressful*. A Likert scale was chosen in order to calculate mean scores for responses, implying that the yielded CSSI-BW

scores would have an increased chance of validity and reliability with a simple standard scoring system.

Scores on the CSSI-BW range from 0-52. Scores 0-27 indicate low response to stress, and scores 28-52 indicate high response to stress. Scores may also be calculated according to each section of the test. For a more thorough interpretation, examinees may see how likely they are to experience stress by separately scoring the items in section one, where low susceptibility = 0-11 and high susceptibility = 12-24. Examinees may also see their current stress level by separately scoring section two of the test, where 0-13 = low stress level and 14-28 = high stress level.

Participants were also given a brief African American female college student stress scale that was created by another student in the Theory of Psychometric Instruments course. Scores from this assessment were correlated with scores from the CSSI-BW in order to evaluate convergent validity.

*Anxiety:* Additionally, each participant completed a short anxiety scale that was created by yet another student in the Theory of Psychometric Instruments course. Scores from the anxiety scale were correlated with scores from the CSSI-BW in order to assess discriminant validity, since empirical studies suggest that anxiety and stress are somewhat related but are two separate phenomena (e.g. Watson et al., 1995). Stress has been defined as the measure of emotional strain, tension, or worry that is the result of any undesirable environmental occurrence for the CSSI-BW, and anxiety is a concept grounded in fear and feelings of dread toward the future (Watson et al., 1995).

## **Data Analyses**

All data were analyzed using SPSS Statistical Software Version 18.0. Prior to examining the psychometric properties of the CSSI-BW, frequency distributions and measures of central tendency were performed on data to examine item means and variances, analyze item distributions, and identify any outliers. Bivariate analyses were conducted to determine reliability and validity of the CSSI-BW, respectively. Simple Pearson's correlations were conducted between test items in order to ensure that each test item was substantially correlated with every other item and the total score for the entire test.

## **Results**

### **Item Analysis**

The initial version of the CSSI-BW included 17 items. After a review of the items, several were found to be redundant. The test was then reduced to 13 items for a more concise instrument. Table 1 presents the results from the simple Pearson's correlations that were performed to reveal inter-item correlations. Based on the inter-item correlations analysis, test item 8, "Discrimination," and test item 6, "Trouble concentrating," were dropped from the test. Item 8 was negatively correlated with several other test items and yielded an extremely low

average correlation efficient ( $r = .12$ ). Item 6 also yielded a low correlation coefficient ( $r = .23$ ) and was consequently removed.

Table 1. Inter-item Correlations Matrix for CSSI-BW Test Items

|                              | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5           | 6           | 7   | 8   | 9   | 10  | 11  | 12  | 13 | Avg<br><i>r</i>                      |
|------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------------|-------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|--------------------------------------|
| 1.Overwhelmed?               | 1   |     |     |     |             |             |     |     |     |     |     |     |    | .44                                  |
| 2. Worry?                    | .75 | 1   |     |     |             |             |     |     |     |     |     |     |    | .34                                  |
| 3. Do not have control?      | .52 | .39 | 1   |     |             |             |     |     |     |     |     |     |    | .27                                  |
| 4. More than you can handle? | .72 | .56 | .45 | 1   |             |             |     |     |     |     |     |     |    | .38                                  |
| 5. Relaxed?                  | .59 | .49 | .13 | .54 | 1           |             |     |     |     |     |     |     |    | .40                                  |
| 6. Trouble concentrating?*   | .49 | .28 | .39 | .46 | .39         | 1           |     |     |     |     |     |     |    | .23                                  |
| 7. Graduating from college   | .42 | .31 | .24 | .20 | .33         | .22         | 1   |     |     |     |     |     |    | .30                                  |
| 8.Discrimination*            | .10 | .00 | .08 | .19 | <b>-.26</b> | <b>-.23</b> | .32 | 1   |     |     |     |     |    | .12                                  |
| 9. Balancing                 | .47 | .27 | .28 | .45 | .51         | .29         | .28 | .19 | 1   |     |     |     |    | .35                                  |
| 10.Responsibility            | .37 | .15 | .34 | .40 | .45         | .43         | .37 | .31 | .66 | 1   |     |     |    | .40                                  |
| 11. Relationship             | .16 | .29 | .03 | .15 | .19         | <b>-.17</b> | .21 | .24 | .22 | .45 | 1   |     |    | .20                                  |
| 12. Financial trouble        | .27 | .28 | .17 | .16 | .30         | .03         | .15 | .02 | .16 | .37 | .38 | 1   |    | .23                                  |
| 13. Lack of sleep            | .41 | .27 | .19 | .24 | .42         | .12         | .59 | .24 | .40 | .49 | .16 | .44 | 1  | .33                                  |
|                              |     |     |     |     |             |             |     |     |     |     |     |     |    | <b>Total Inter-Item <i>r</i> .31</b> |

\*Item 6 and item 8 will be removed from the final CSSI-BW because of its low inter-item correlation.

Table 2 reports items mean for each test question. As seen in the table, item 3, which asks, “How often do you feel like you do not have control?” and item 5, which asks, “How often do have trouble concentrating?” were also removed from the test because they had the lowest p-values and are therefore presented difficulty for participants ( $p = 1.79$  and  $p = 1.31$ , respectively). Thus, the final version of the test is a 10-item measure of stress in Black college women.

Table 2. Item Difficulty for CSSI-BW Test Items

| Item                                | P-value |
|-------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. Overwhelmed                      | 2.56    |
| 2. Worry                            | 2.41    |
| 3. Lack of control                  | 1.79*   |
| 4. More than you can handle         | 2.33    |
| 5. Relaxed                          | 2.00    |
| 6. Concentrating                    | 2.31    |
| 7. Graduating                       | 2.36    |
| 8. Discrimination                   | 1.31*   |
| 9. Social life and academic balance | 2.13    |
| 10. Increased responsibility        | 2.90    |
| 11. Relationship                    | 2.05    |
| 12. Financial troubles              | 2.82    |
| 13. Lack of sleep                   | 2.48    |

\*Item 3 and Item 8 will be removed from the CSSI-BW because of its difficulty.

### Assessing Reliability

In order to assess test reliability, internal consistency was computed using split-half reliability, Kuder-Richardson, and coefficient alpha. Split-half reliability was determined using two methods. First, split-half reliability was calculated for the CSSI-BW by dividing the test into two halves, where the first half contained the first seven items (stress susceptibility), and the second half contained the remaining six items (current stress level). A total score was computed for half one, and a total score was computed for half two. A bivariate Pearson correlation was then performed on scores from the first half of the test and scores from the second half of the test. Results revealed a reliability coefficient of .48. Second, odd-even reliability was calculated by adding odd numbered test items together to form a total score and by adding even numbered test items to form a total score. As expected, results yielded a reliability coefficient of .82.

Still, these reliability coefficients are not indicators of reliability for the entire test. After applying the Spearman Brown correction to the coefficient obtained from the split-half reliability analysis, there was an increase from .48 to .64. According to the formula, an additional 17 items are needed to achieve an acceptable reliability of .80. When the correction was applied to the odd-even reliability coefficient, there was also an increase from .82 to .90.

In order to assess overall reliability, Cronbach's alpha was computed with a coefficient of .84. Since the CSSI-BW is a heterogeneous measure of stress in Black college women, yielding scores for both stress susceptibility and current stress level, Cronbach's alpha was also calculated for test items 1-4 that assess stress susceptibility ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and for items 5-10 that assess current stress level ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

### Assessing Test Validity

In order to assess the validity of the CSSI-BW, convergent and discriminant validity were examined. For convergent validity, scores from the CSSI-BW were correlated with scores from

an African American Female College Student Stress Inventory that was designed by a student in Theory of Psychometric Instruments. As anticipated, a simple Pearson's correlation yielded a validity coefficient of .61.

Conversely, discriminant validity for the CSSI-BW was established using an Anxiety scale that was also designed by another student in Theory of Psychometric Instruments. A bivariate Pearson's correlation between scores from the CSSI-BW and the Madison-Weaver Anxiety scale revealed a validity coefficient of .30.

## **Discussion**

Since no precise instrument existed for measuring response to stress in academic life for Black women, the CSSI-BW was designed and assessed. Results from this analysis demonstrated that the CSSI-BW is both generally reliable and valid. A low split-half reliability coefficient was expected, since the CSSI-BW is a heterogeneous measure of stress measuring both stress susceptibility and current stress level. The low reliability coefficient implies that stress susceptibility and current stress are not substantially related but share some association.

Further, scores from the CSSI-BW did not highly correlate with scores from the African American female college student stress scale. A value greater than .80 would have been ideal, since a higher correlation means greater validity, but the coefficient .61 met the requirement. It is possible, however, that the moderate validity coefficient was produced because of the CSSI-BW's heterogeneity even though both tests are measuring the same construct.

Despite achieving general reliability and validity, there is still much room for improvement. The study sample was conveniently recruited from one class at one school. The institution has a unique student body that is in no way representative of all Black college women. Since the CSSI-BW is intended to be a measure of psychological stress in all traditional Black college women, the ideal standardization sample would consist of at least 300 self-identified Black college women from colleges and universities all over the country, creating a national norm group and ensuring statistical stability. Respondents should not only be Black college women, but should also equally represent liberal arts, technical, agricultural, and mechanical institutions.

The items chosen for the CSSI-BW reflected common stressors for Black women that were identified by Watts-Jones (1990) and reflected common sources of stress for college students. Still, more work should be done to specifically identify sources of stress among Black college women. It may not be sufficient to combine sources of stress for Black women with sources of stress for college students, since it is highly likely that the two overlap in a unique way for the Black college woman. Future studies should focus on evaluating stressors for Black college women in order to construct a comprehensive measure of stress in this population. Scores from a measure like the CSSI-BW can be used identify Black college women who should seek preventive programs, which can then be tailored to meet their psychological needs.

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## Appendix

### CSSI-BW (Original)

| Stress Susceptibility Index |   |  |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| <b>*SS1<sup>1</sup></b>     | How often do you find yourself feeling overwhelmed?                       | 0=Never<br>1=Rarely<br>2=Sometimes<br>3=Frequently<br>4=Always |
| <b>*SS2</b>                 | How often do you worry?   | 0=Never<br>1=Rarely<br>2=Sometimes<br>3=Frequently<br>4=Always |
| <b>SS3</b>                  | How often do you feel uneasy?   | 0=Never<br>1=Rarely<br>2=Sometimes<br>3=Frequently<br>4=Always |
| <b>SS4</b>                  | How often do you feel concerned?  | 0=Never<br>1=Rarely<br>2=Sometimes<br>3=Frequently<br>4=Always |
| <b>*SS5</b>                 | How often do you feel like you do not have control?                       | 0=Never<br>1=Rarely<br>2=Sometimes<br>3=Frequently<br>4=Always |
| <b>*SS6</b>                 | How often do you feel like you are dealing with more than you can handle? | 0=Never<br>1=Rarely<br>2=Sometimes<br>3=Frequently<br>4=Always |
| <b>*SS7</b>                 | How often do you feel relaxed?  | 0=Always<br>1=Frequently<br>2=Sometimes<br>3=Rarely<br>4=Never |
| <b>*SS8</b>                 | How often do you have trouble concentrating?                              | 0=Never<br>1=Rarely<br>2=Sometimes<br>3=Frequently<br>4=Always |

<sup>1</sup> An asterisk indicates the desired test items to be used in the final version.

| Current Stress Index |  |   |
|----------------------|--|---|
| <b>CS1</b>           | Racism                                   | 0= Not at all stressful<br>1= A little stressful<br>2= Somewhat stressful<br>3=Moderately Stressful<br>4=Very Stressful |
| <b>*CS2</b>          | Discrimination                           | 0= Not at all stressful<br>1= A little stressful<br>2= Somewhat stressful<br>3=Moderately Stressful<br>4=Very Stressful |
| <b>CS3</b>           | The need to succeed                      | 0= Not at all stressful<br>1= A little stressful<br>2= Somewhat stressful<br>3=Moderately Stressful<br>4=Very Stressful |
| <b>*CS4</b>          | Balancing a social life with school life | 0= Not at all stressful<br>1= A little stressful<br>2= Somewhat stressful<br>3=Moderately Stressful<br>4=Very Stressful |
| <b>*CS5</b>          | Increased responsibility                 | 0= Not at all stressful<br>1= A little stressful<br>2= Somewhat stressful<br>3=Moderately Stressful<br>4=Very Stressful |
| <b>*CS6</b>          | Graduating from college                  | 0= Not at all stressful<br>1= A little stressful<br>2= Somewhat stressful<br>3=Moderately Stressful<br>4=Very Stressful |
| <b>CS7</b>           | Pursuing post-secondary education        | 0= Not at all stressful<br>1= A little stressful<br>2= Somewhat stressful<br>3=Moderately Stressful<br>4=Very Stressful |
| <b>*CS8</b>          | Being in a relationship                  | 0= Not at all stressful<br>1= A little stressful<br>2= Somewhat stressful<br>3=Moderately Stressful<br>4=Very Stressful |
| <b>*CS9</b>          | Financial troubles                       | 0= Not at all stressful<br>1= A little stressful<br>2= Somewhat stressful<br>3=Moderately Stressful                     |

|             |                |                         |
|-------------|----------------|-------------------------|
| <b>CS10</b> | *Lack of sleep | 4=Very Stressful        |
|             |                | 0= Not at all stressful |
|             |                | 1= A little stressful   |
|             |                | 2= Somewhat stressful   |
|             |                | 3=Moderately Stressful  |
|             |                | 4=Very Stressful        |

CSSI-BW (Revised)

*Section 1*

Using the scale below, please indicate how often you experience each of the following feelings **by typing the number** in the blank beside each question. **Please only use the numbers provided below.**

|           |            |               |                |            |
|-----------|------------|---------------|----------------|------------|
| 0 (Never) | 1 (Rarely) | 2 (Sometimes) | 3 (Frequently) | 4 (Always) |
|-----------|------------|---------------|----------------|------------|

1. \_\_\_\_\_ How often do you feel overwhelmed?
2. \_\_\_\_\_ How often do you worry?
3. \_\_\_\_\_ How often do you feel like you do not have control?
4. \_\_\_\_\_ How often do you feel like you are dealing with more than you can handle?
5. \_\_\_\_\_ How often do you feel relaxed?
6. \_\_\_\_\_ How often do you have trouble concentrating?

*Section 2*

Using the scale below, please indicate how stressful you have found each of the following issues or situations in the past 30 days **by typing the number** in the blank provided next to each question. **Please only use the numbers provided below.**

|                          |                          |                        |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 0 (Not at all stressful) | 1 (A Little Stressful)   | 2 (Somewhat Stressful) |
|                          | 3 (Moderately Stressful) | 4 (Very stressful)     |

7. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduating from college
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Discrimination
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Balancing your social life with academics
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Increased responsibility
11. \_\_\_\_\_ Being in a relationship
12. \_\_\_\_\_ Financial trouble
13. \_\_\_\_\_ Lack of sleep

CSSI-BW (Revised-II)

*Section 1*

Using the scale below, please indicate how often you experience each of the following feelings **by typing the number** in the blank beside each question. **Please only use the numbers provided below.**

|           |            |               |                |            |
|-----------|------------|---------------|----------------|------------|
| 0 (Never) | 1 (Rarely) | 2 (Sometimes) | 3 (Frequently) | 4 (Always) |
|-----------|------------|---------------|----------------|------------|

1. \_\_\_\_\_ How often do you feel overwhelmed?
2. \_\_\_\_\_ How often do you worry?
3. \_\_\_\_\_ How often do you feel like you are dealing with more than you can handle?
4. \_\_\_\_\_ How often do you feel relaxed?

*Section 2*

Using the scale below, please indicate how stressful you have found each of the following issues or situations in the past 30 days **by typing the number** in the blank provided next to each question. **Please only use the numbers provided below.**

|                          |                          |                        |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 0 (Not at all stressful) | 1 (A Little Stressful)   | 2 (Somewhat Stressful) |
|                          | 3 (Moderately Stressful) | 4 (Very stressful)     |

5. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduating from college
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Balancing your social life with academics
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Increased responsibility
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Being in a relationship
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Financial trouble
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Lack of sleep