

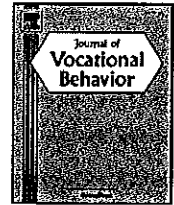


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Unveiling a reflective diary methodology for exploring the lived experiences of stress and coping

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ABSTRACT

This article unveils a diary methodology exploring accounts of ongoing experiences during the final furlong of university life and examines the role of diary keeping for gaining insights into stress and coping with performance-related and general life stressors. The focus is on thirty young people who, following a year working in industry, were in the midst of their final year of university study—undergoing coursework assessments, preparing for final examinations, making key career choices, and taking part in the whole process of job applications, assessment centres, and interviews. All were attending a course exploring theoretical and practical approaches to self-awareness and interpersonal skills development. The article shares insights regarding the use of diaries for the exploration of stress and coping from the perspective of both the researcher and the diarist.

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Introduction

'When I write, I can shake off all my cares'. Anne Frank in her diary 'Kitty' 5th April 1944

A diary is a frequently kept, often daily, record of personal experiences and observations in which ongoing thoughts, feelings, and ideas can be expressed. Increasingly diaries are being used to investigate social, psychological, and physiological processes within everyday situations in many academic, vocational, and educational settings (e.g., Kacewicz, Slatcher, & Pennebaker, 2007; Pennebaker, 2004; Burton & King, 2004; Daniels & Harris, 2005; Poppleton, Briner, & Kiefer, 2008). Diaries are thought to capture "the little experiences of everyday life that fill most of our working time and occupy the vast majority of our conscious attention." (Wheeler & Reis, 1991:340). One key benefit of diary methodology is that it permits the examination of reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context, providing information complementary to that obtainable by traditional research designs (Reis, 1994). Also, diaries reduce the likelihood of retrospection as the minimum amount of time elapses between an experience and recall. This is important for recall accuracy as Bartlett (1932) noted, "Remembering is... the past being continually remade, reconstructed in the interests of the present." This article outlines an in-depth reflective diary methodology used for gaining insight into the lived experiences of stress and coping in university Business and Management students in their final year of study.

The experience of stress, reactions, and coping in university students

Research exploring the stress of the student experience has typically been the result of methodological convenience, and so it is not necessarily representative of the general population (Peterson, 2001). However, the experience of young people such as these

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is that they are potentially a vulnerable group in their own right due to the performance pressures they face alongside wider life challenges. Research has consistently shown high levels of stress experienced by university students (Swick, 1987; Felsten & Wilcox, 1992). Abouserie (1994) investigated stress in undergraduates in relation to locus of control and self-esteem and found that they were experiencing a whole host of academic and life stressors. Studying for examinations and worrying about results were deemed to be the most problematic, followed by having too much to do and the amount to learn. Of course, these are in tandem with other life stressors that they encounter. Almost 78% and 10.4%, respectively, were experiencing stress at moderate to serious levels. In addition, those with an external locus of control and lower self-esteem were more likely to be suffering from poor psychological well-being. Further research has found that students report significantly higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of satisfaction than do those with highly stressed occupations such as correctional officers, teachers, nurses, and human service workers (Cotton, Dollard, & De Jonge, 2002; Dollard, Winefield, & Winefield, 2001). Levels of psychological distress are linked to aspects of the study environment in terms of high work pressure, low control, and low support from other students. Confirming the work of Tofi et al. (1996) and others (Felsten & Wilcox, 1992; Winefield, 1993), student social support was found to only impact on emotional and psychological reactions to study and did not translate into enhanced work performance.

In terms of reactions to stress, research has highlighted particular unhealthy student behaviours. Webb, Ashton, and Kamali (1996) found that some students were consuming alcohol and taking drug at levels equivalent to clinical outpatients. Students attributed this behaviour to pleasure rather than to stress, but their subjective ratings of anxiety were high and they reported sleep difficulties. As students are experiencing high levels of work and life stressors, we need to explore this further and consider ways of subsequently helping them cope at stressful times and develop skills for coping in the future. High levels of distress may lead to underachievement, with subsequent effects on their career. This article unveils an approach that, as the findings suggest, can aid students in their identification of and coping with stressors as well as the research methodological benefits it offers.

One approach that has been taken to help such individuals cope has been through time management interventions (Macan, Shahani, Dipboye, & Phillips, 1990). Schuler (1979) found that students who perceive having control over their time report significantly greater evaluation of their performance, greater work and life satisfaction, less role ambiguity, less role overload, and fewer job-related somatic tension. One aim in designing this present study was to enhance students' perception of control over aspects of their lives by goal setting and reflection through ongoing diary keeping. Yet another was to explore the sources of, and reactions to, stress. However, content of the diaries revealed that the process of keeping them regularly may help in the management of stress at challenging times.

The nature of reflective diaries

Some scholars and practitioners distinguish between diaries, logs (a record of information that is a highly structured factual account maintained over time), and journals, which combine the objective aspect of a log with the personal aspect of the diary, but with a more reflective learning slant. Mallon (1984:1) argues that any drive to differentially define the terms is not essential as "[t]he two terms are in fact hopelessly muddled. They're both rooted in the idea of dailiness, but perhaps because of a *journal's* links to the newspaper trade and a *diary's* to *Dear*, the latter seems more intimate than the former." The contemporary focus on learning and reflection in diaries or journals shifts the emphasis to process rather than product and makes them a helpful tool within educational environments (Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper, 2001; Loo & Thorpe, 2002).

In terms of skill development, writing can increase awareness of the importance of work choice, of the metaphysical and symbolic meaning of words, of things that are important to attend to, and of how to tailor which words to choose for communication to a particular audience. Journaling helps one sustain oneself emotionally at work and can assist diarists in reflecting on experiences, thus providing an avenue for addressing the theory/practice gap (Fonteyn, 2001; Hancock, 1999). For example, Bennett and Kingham (1993) provided a framework for student nurses to systematically keep diaries as part of their nursing education, as a medium to record their experiences and reactions, and reflect upon these with coaching from a clinical supervisor. Journaling can also help develop narrative skills, integrate theory research and practice, release feelings about experiences, see different truths in a situation, and increase observational skills (Callister, 1993). Redfern (1995) also suggests that by writing, thoughts can be transferred onto paper for examination and analysis in a less personal, more objective way. Further, the process of constructing words and sentences in one's head before committing these to paper enables thoughts and recollections of events to be given a certain degree of structure and accuracy. This can then provide a permanent record of professional practice, which can be used to gain further insights at a later date. From a researchers perspective, this can help us gather well-considered and in depth data from our participants.

Diary methods have been used in multiple domains and in many aspects of psychology where they have typically been used to gather statistics to model changes over time rather than reflect on a process (e.g., Daniels & Harris, 2005). The central notion in this present study is reflection, which has been widely discussed since Dewey's (1933) original concept, by Schön (1983, 1987) and others. Reflection can be defined as "the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self and which results in a changed conceptual perspective." (Boyd & Fales, 1983:1). The issue of reflection is embedded within several theoretical frameworks and models (e.g., Kember et al., 1999; Hutchinson & Allen, 1997; Scanlon & Chernomas, 1997; McCaugherty, 1991). Gibbs' (1988) model outlines a cycle of six key stages: (1) describing what happened, (2) an examination of feelings and thoughts related to this, (3) evaluation of the positive and negative aspects, (4) subsequent analysis where sense is made, (5) conclusions drawn regarding what else can be done, and (6) action planning – involving actions that may be applied with future re-occurrence. This approach resembles the framework for reflection provided to the diarists whose experiences are detailed in this article.

Reflective diaries, self-awareness, and stress

The tradition of diary keeping and writing as a way of enhancing self-awareness and coping during stressful times has been well documented in other forms of literature in terms of fiction (for example, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*) and real life settings (for example, the diary of Anne Frank). Diary keeping creates a narrative of events, thoughts, hopes, and emotions and is on one level intensely private. It may be seen as the purest form of self-reflection, a therapeutic mediation of one's life, not intended for others' eyes. One could argue that the intensity of writing may be in direct proportion to the degree of stress and trauma suffered. A key aim of this current study is to explore the uses of writing a reflective diary for individuals as they experience a stressful and challenging time in their lives.

The most influential work exploring the role of diary keeping for healing and other physical and mental health benefits has been that of Pennebaker (1993, 1997, 2004) and others (e.g., Pennebaker, Hughes, & O'Heeron, 1987; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker, Colder & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker & Segal, 1999). These studies indicate that having people write about their deeply felt emotions and thoughts, especially about traumatic and stressful events, can result in healthy improvements in social, psychological, behavioural, and biological measures (Kacewicz et al., 2007). Pennebaker and Segal (1999) have suggested that disclosure through writing may best be understood as promoting the creation of narrative sources of meaning and that writing is a way of making sense out of one's life experience and pulling together otherwise fragmented stories, memoirs, and experiences. Debatable is the issue of whether a single cathartic outpouring is more effective than regular journal keeping, which may lead to rumination and dwelling on issues and benefits also accrue from writing about intensely positive experiences (Burton & King, 2004).

Using diaries to gather data on the experience of stress

As a method for obtaining data on stressful experiences, diaries are a positive alternative to other more frequently used approaches. Compared to interviews, they are not typically retrospective and may overcome certain issues of gathering sensitive data while adding richness to quantitative data collection. The vast majority of stress research has used cross-sectional, survey-based methods, which gather self-reports of general assessments of perceived stress and its effects. However, the last 10 years or so has seen a call for greater use of qualitative methods for capturing a wider range of causes and manifestations of stress and individual coping strategies (e.g., Alford, Malouff, & Osland, 2005; Dewe, 2001; Schabracq & Cooper, 1998). The diary method has increasingly been promoted as an alternative to more traditional quantitative methods and yet has tended to be used in a similar quantitative fashion (e.g., Daniels & Harris, 2005; Harris & Daniels, 2005; Harris, Daniels, & Briner, 2003). Disappointingly, this means that gains in quantitative rigor may be at the expense of insight that can be expected from diary data. Positivistic researcher-defined constructs in the area of stress inhibit the exploration of subjective meaning in a relatively spontaneous and projective way. This may fail to reveal the "invisible roots" of stress, hence limiting the relevance and application of theory.

As has been argued in several different contexts (e.g., Millward, 2006; Smith, 1996), qualitative, phenomenological studies can complement survey-based designs by presenting alternative views of complex phenomena, which in turn may hold new implications for theory and practice. Hence, this study has made use of a reflective diary methodology that captures stress – experience, reactions, and coping – as it happens – capturing peoples' relatively immediate and spontaneous assessments of daily experiences in which stress occurs (Symon, 1998). Also diaries may permit a more detailed exploration of the specific ways in which stress occurs and affects the individual and how stress and coping interrelate. This in turn should facilitate more immediate and accurate judgements of the relative importance of key stressors and their impact based on real and experienced events. An aim of this study is to use diaries in a very traditional sense in terms of regularity of recording, coupled with the approach of a reflective journal. They will be used to gather illustrative data into how people view stress, their own individual role in the experience, and how they react on a day-to-day basis using individual reflection, self-assessment, and problem solving.

Study context, sample, and approach to data collection

The context of this study is within a UK university business school. Increasingly universities, and especially business schools, are expected to prepare students for industry (for example, Pfeffer & Fong, 2004). It is important that the university environment is supportive and capable of nurturing optimal learning and performance in students, especially in skills related to well-being. In the main, stress research has focussed on employed samples, but, by working with those who are preparing to enter employment, we may be able to encourage the development of effective coping strategies. These may transfer to the workplace, resulting in lower individual and organisational costs of stress.

Final-year students, following their internship (placement) in industry, attended an optional module on "Advanced Interpersonal Skills". This article reports on findings from thirty cases taken from a data set of fifty-four, which formed one particular year's cohort. These had chosen to focus on stress management and coping as one of their goal areas for development. This is not to say that many of the others did not find stress a problem. The course had a larger proportion of females to males, which was not in proportion to the degree courses from which they came. This may be because females are more drawn to this kind of work with self-disclosure and analysis. It was clearly stated at the start of the course that diary keeping would be a key component, and some critics have suggested that the diary is a "genre to which women have always felt especially drawn" (Mallon, 1984:19). Although males may show an initial reluctance, the previous 5 years of running the course had shown that both

males and females were equally as capable and motivated to use the diary approach. So, for the purposes of this article, no differentiation will be made in terms of interpreting the findings based on the gender of the respondent.

An initial in-depth exploration of awareness of self, and individual aspects of behaviour related to stress, was carried out via a number of different methods, processes, and tools, for example, Twenty Statements Test (TST) (Kuhn & McPartland, 1951); Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Myers & McCauley, 1985); The Social Mirror Activity (Covey, 1990); Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1955); Type A behaviour and other stress-related measures (e.g., Bortner, 1969). They also received sessions on goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990), the use of reflection and keeping reflective diaries (for example, Gibbs, 1988; Scanlon & Chernomas, 1997), and a session on identifying the nature and causes of stress. They also each had one-to-one, in-class, and online coaching on setting goals and using reflection plus continued input via further lecture session on the course, which ran for a period of 4 months (February through until May). They were required to produce a 3500-word main report on awareness of self, as well as an unlimited regular diary with supporting materials such as analysis of stress and coping methods.

Approach to keeping the diaries

The reflection not only provided data on the experience of stress as it occurred as well as on past events but also reflections on the use of the diaries themselves. The coaching provided on reflective diary keeping emphasised the importance of finding a quiet time and place, perhaps early evening. They were asked to write regularly, daily ideally, and not just when a significant event took place as other topics would also be relevant. They were asked to start their diaries straight away and to reflect on the process even before they had chosen their goal areas. They were encouraged to reflect on their awareness of self and be honest and open in the light of their initial training and enhanced self-awareness. Based on the models presented, they were encouraged to be self-evaluative and to use the diaries to process information, thoughts, and feelings. Over the duration of the course, they were given periodic reminders, but they were motivated to write as it was part of their assessment. They were given regular chances to ask questions, obtain advice, and receive feedback on the style of their diaries. (Symon, 1998). The ethics of asking people to be so intimate in their information giving may be challenged, but the approach can be justified as there are many reported benefits of this approach in the literature outlined previously, in addition to feedback obtained from previous cohorts. On occasion the diaries elicited recall of specific traumatic events, although this was not the main focus as was the work of Pennebaker cited previously. I made sure that each diarist had chance to talk things thorough with me as a coach if necessary. Also at the end of the diary period, there was the chance to debrief, either in their written work or in a special focus group session. The diary keeping could end when they wanted and was as detailed as they felt able; however, most chose to maximise their learning and to write until the day that the report was to be submitted.

Analysis of the data

This study has an abundance of data to examine. Each respondent provided a detailed description of their own approach to stress and reasons they had chosen this as a goal area. Then they reflected overall on their experience in addition to, and within, the lengthy diaries. The diary keeping was open in terms of content and the extent of what they recounted over the time period, thus the amount provided varied per diarist. They had been coached on how often would be suitable and beneficial, to explore their feelings, devise action plans from their reflections, and continue to try out methods for managing stress and report on these. The advice suggested such processes as those outlined in models such as Gibbs (1988). The result was that some wrote brief, others lengthy, entries totalling a few pages per time, some used their own mood scales, other used pictures etc. Some wrote every day, sometimes twice a day, others wrote less frequently. Because of this, the data were not uniform to enable quantitative analysis or template analysis (King, 1998). For the purpose of this article, diarists' accounts were content analysed for mention of the sources of stress and reactions to it and themes emerged. Diary entries were then examined for comments on progress in diary keeping and comments on the actual use of the diary. As data were in the form of ongoing diary entries with an overall end of process reflection, to some extent, diarists validated their own experience and provided credibility checks, summaries, and debriefs. Dreyfuss (1984:2) comments that "human self-interpretation is essential to the understanding of human beings." Others suggest that we can only reflect on lived experience after it has happened, and even when present, interpretation takes place only after it is fixed as text. This suggests that the use of the diaries and the reflection by the writers themselves, coupled with myself as the reader and researcher, may come close to actual observation of the experiences recounted (Taylor, 1987; Van Manen, 1990). The analysis of these data takes an interpretative approach in so far as I was trying to capture the essence of each diarists account in a phenomenological sense (Berg, 2007). This approach provides a means for discovering the practical understandings of meaning and actions evident in the diaries as they unfold and helps us understand the world of the participants within which the events occur. It was possible to check for the validity of my interpretation via the use of focus groups with the cohort at the end of the course, the input of a fellow tutor who was offering support on the course, and the students themselves as they reflected overall on their diaries content and progression.

Results

The results will (a) briefly outline the sources of, and reactions to, stress in the students in order to show the nature and extent of the problem; (b) focus on the use of the diaries in terms of identifying stress, reactions, and coping and interactions; and (c) explore how the skills in, and attitudes towards, reflective diary keeping developed over time.

What do the diaries reveal about the sources of and reactions to stress in the students?

A summary of the sources of stress, both external and internal, as described by the diarists are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

They claim to experience stress from coursework deadlines, too much work to do, and issues regarding relationships with other students. Much of this is due to the increased workload in the final year. This may be due to the contrast with their year in industry, or the steep increase from previous years of study. However, as Table 1 shows, they are experiencing a host of other stressors too that typically do not come to light in usual stress research, i.e., pressures from parents' behaviours (e.g., divorce, suicide attempts) and other significant life events (such as siblings going to war zones etc.). Other internal sources, seen in Table 2, include living with eating disorders, low self-esteem, and poor coping mechanisms. These stressors are identified due to the methodology employed coupled with the techniques used for in-depth self-awareness. The yield is greater and more insightful than more positivistic research, which expects respondents to select and score stressor items predetermined by the researcher. The diaries are also able to detect how stressors build up over time and fluctuate in terms of their importance and impact and can explore the "layering" of stressor upon stressor.

Table 3 shows the kinds of reactions that students are reporting in terms of how they group into behavioural, psychological/behavioural, and physiological reactions.

Again, the range of possible reactions revealed by this approach is more comprehensive than is usually encountered in stress research.

Using the diaries for identifying interactions between stressors, reactions, and coping

The most useful element is how the ongoing diaries show the interactions and relationships between certain stressors and reactions. One female explained:

"Feeling really confused about pretty much everything in my life now – graduate job, where to live, what to do and how things are with my relationship. I just don't feel in control of anything and I have realised I don't like that."

Table 1
Sources of stress in the lives of the students—external factors.

Stressors related to university life/studying etc.	Stressors related to performance/expectations	Stressors related to daily hassles
<i>Workload:</i>	Finality of it all—last chance to do best	When a number of things go wrong at the same time Traffic jams
Too much to do in the final year and the contrast to previous years	Feedback, assessment, criticism	Internet not working
Amount of preparation for examinations/reading/coursework etc.	Desire to achieve a good grade	Loss of data Unexpected events and interruptions to schedule
Coursework deadlines	Not sufficiently prepared	Errors and making mistakes
Job applications/interviews	Examination results	Changes to schedule
Deadlines in general/timetabling issues	Rejection from jobs/other courses etc. Drop in grades/lack of progression Expectation from parents/self Doing presentations Constantly comparing self to others	
<i>Relationships:</i>	Long established/historical stressors	Current life issues
Other peoples' inefficiencies or not putting the effort in	Being bullied at school having knock on effect	Financial problems: overdraft, bills
Coursework meetings/arguments etc.	Cross-cultural issues (e.g., racial issues/mother not speaking the same language), fear of race affecting prospects	Living with family and wife
Living with people and conflict etc.	Sense of abandonment as a child from a parent	Brother drug addict Sisters' illness
Need for intimacy	Being beaten up by ex boyfriend	Death/murder of friend
Having to mix with people you do not know	Parents separation and subsequent relationships	Death of mother
Authority figures	Brothers death some years ago	Caring for mother with cancer Mothers' attempted suicide
Missing boyfriend/other friends		Splitting from boyfriend/girlfriend
Caring what others think		Brother going to Iraq
Being left out of things		Partners issues
Being torn in terms of loyalties		Death of family member
Being alone		
Selfishness, indifference, and unkind treatment by others		Family conflict
Having to suppress opinions		Loss of friends as they moved away

Table 2

Sources of stress in the lives of the students—internal factors.

Personality/Disposition	Coping strategies	Health-related issues
Pessimism/Worrier/Fear of change and the unknown/future	Unable to stop procrastinating/using procrastination to create pressure before can work	Tiredness
Lack of self-esteem/confidence	Poor time management	Depression
Self-criticism	Ineffective techniques for managing stress	Suicidal thoughts and self-harming
Impatience	Poor use of to-do lists	Poor body image and eating disorders
Get stressed for no-reason and with minor things	Poor management generally of pressurised times in life	Addiction to chocolate
Inability to see the 'big picture' and getting obsessed by minor details	Poor work/life balance	Dyslexia
Need for structure	Unable to relax	Poor self-confidence and esteem
Inability to concentrate on one thing at a time		Blushing and worrying about impression
Being disorganised, indecisive, chaotic, always late, not prepared		Living with chronic back pain
Inability to motivate oneself		Fear of water
Perfectionist		
Self-imposed pressure to achieve		
Don't like routine		
Over-extend oneself		
Not wanting to be out of control		
Trapped by own feelings		
Over-sensitive and easily hurt		
Easily distracted		
Sense of guilt if not working.		
Type A/locus of control		

They can also shed light on apparent contradictions within individuals in terms of how they react. For example, one female admitted:

"In informal, social situations, I don't like planning and much prefer to see what happens, finding it annoying when people try to arrange a schedule. However, when it comes to working environments... I need structure and keep an up-to-date schedule, without which I become disorientated and quite stressed."

Table 3

Reactions to stress in the sample.

Behavioural	Psychological/Emotional	Physiological/Physical
Insensitive and hurtful to others/lash out at those who I care about/annoyed at self Negative self-talk, e.g., "I can't do it."	Poor self-esteem/feel like a failure/frustration/dented confidence/self-questioning Obsessing, stressing over minor details/thinking about things I should be doing/worry about others/feel guilty/hypochondria	Hard to relax/restless/tense shoulders/ high levels of adrenaline Heartbeat rises
Critical of own and others' behaviour	Unable to concentrate/Forgetful/poor prioritising/unfocussed Disorientated/Milling about/de-motivated	Breathlessness/Shallow breathing
Withdraw from others/unable to express myself/do not let others help/become introverted/subdued Become cool and collected	Panic, fear, anxiety, worry, nervousness/feel overwhelmed/all-consuming feelings/thoughts intruding/feel unable to cope/feel rushed/flustered	Nervousness Feel physically sick/nausea
Mood swings/appear depressed/too emotional/excessive crying/weepy/calls to family crying	Low/upset/hate life/stuck in a black hole/unhappy/depressed/pessimistic/want to be invisible and left alone/suicidal thoughts	Headaches
Lack of eye contact/biting nails, tapping feet, drumming fingers/loud sighing/clenching teeth/excessive scratching/fidgeting/nervous habits Sleep difficulties	Isolated, alone, lonely	Spots
Short temper/fuse/aggressive/passive aggressive/irritable/ratty/freak out/argumentative/impatient/sarcastic	Bottle up feelings/close off emotions Daydreaming	Cirrhosis Extreme fatigue/exhaustion/lack of energy/drained/tired
Eating disorder/excessive eating/binge eating/vomiting/OCD/hypochondria/self harm/suicidal behaviour More exercise	Sensitive/feel misunderstood/lack of trust in others	Spasm in back
Use of alcohol and cigarettes Procrastinating/disorganised/lost control of performance		Irritable bowel syndrome/stomach pain Weight loss

It is also possible to see which stressors may lead to which outcomes, reactions, and emotions, which is not always possible with questionnaires and other qualitative data gathering such as "one-shot" interviews. A female student described how:

"In the past, discussing work between friends has been competitive which brought about frustration and anxiety. When I discuss work in a co-operative manner, my stress levels reduce dramatically as I feel supported. A difficult aspect of this course was that a number of friends had a similar goal and each of us had different ways of dealing with it. Whilst I needed discussion and enjoyed collaborative learning, others relieved stress by avoiding discussions about work. This began to frustrate me as I felt that I was forbidden from talking about work, as it was taboo subject."

This last comment also highlights how one person's approach to coping with stress may actually become a subsequent stressor for someone else.

Writing enhances clarity for the diarist (and the researcher) in terms of identifying which stressors have the greatest impact and are most worthy of coping attempts.

"Seeing my stressed behaviour written down has made me realise how irrational I can be and has encouraged me to address this."

The action of writing encourages the diarist to explore certain aspects of their behaviour, which in certain circumstances may be seen as positive, but can be detrimental when taken to extremes. One male diarist explained:

"I am practical, rational and logical – things don't faze me, leaving me with the ability to see the bigger picture in situations where emotional people get 'bogged' down, I rise to the occasion and provide solutions as occurred during those incidents I previously outlined."

But then he reflects and explains:

"When my natural 'controlling' nature is pushed to the extent of having no control, my reactions become unpredictable and I 'freak out', as is explained in March 4th entry regarding my brothers' departure to Iraq. When in a situation that I have no control over I need to accept it and not fall into my natural defence mechanism where I close off emotionally which has previously caused regrettable issues particularly with ex-girlfriends. This deep-rooted unemotional approach I accentuate has developed further weaknesses in my ability to communicate deeper feelings."

Closing off from his emotions was a key underlying theme for this diarist. The diary entries and associated reflection show how behavioural style and reactions to stress may consequently lead to other situations, which exacerbate stress—i.e., a lack of an emotional acknowledgement and expression creating issues with his girlfriends and relationship breakdown. This shows how the diary approach might be an effective way for someone to develop skills in emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1995).

A female student expressed her progress in rationalising and thus controlling emotion:

"On reflection, the diary has worked as a tool enabling me to recognise certain attitudes built into my personality. Expressing feelings rather than bottling them up has resulted in more desirable outcomes. Using logic is so simple and so effective, but a skill I have learnt throughout this task is when to apply it."

and:

"As I began to confront my stress goal I came to the conclusion that it was partly related to the emotions of anger. When finding ways to cope with this bottled emotion, I participated in an exercise increasing my awareness to the logic of the situation. Using this method, rationality became more frequent each time this feeling occurred. I've been able to tame the emotion rather than react without thinking; I began using a tactic of counting backwards from five to diffuse the potential situation."

Another claimed that keeping a diary this way for the first time helped her keep her stress levels under control. Diarising about her lack of focus and work efforts created discomfort and dissonance, sparking her conscience and acting as a lever for action:

"I found for the first time I was really able to keep my stress levels under control when it came to work. I started feeling uneasy when I procrastinated, something that I have never really experienced before as can be seen in entry 14 of my diary: the whole time I was just sat there thinking about my timetable, how much I had to do when I got home, how agitated I felt about missing hours of work."

I observed that a couple of those diarists (typically those who claimed in previous self-analysis not to express their emotions usually) used the diary in an autobiographical sense by downloading historical emotionally laden information. This may masquerade as being informative for the diary reader, but in fact was clearly to their own advantage in a therapeutic or cognitive

restructuring sense as in Pennebaker's previously cited work. One wrote thirty-four pages about his life to date, especially his mother's death from cancer, before actually starting the daily diary proper.

"When beginning this 'summary' I had no idea of how long it would actually be, and how difficult emotionally some things would be to write, particularly about my mother who was diagnosed in June with brain cancer and fought an immensely difficult battle with such bravery before she passed away on the 15th December. There are tears on the page here!"

An interesting point regarding the use of the diary method is that when we typically examine stress, reactions, and coping, we infer that responses or non-responses are the result of conscious choices about managing stress. Analysing diaries kept over time shows that many responses are not within a respondents' control. For example, one female diarist explained:

"I can't believe I didn't eat yesterday. I realise it was a stupid thing to do. I was so weak I couldn't do any work. So today I was stressing about coursework and how much I have left to do. I know there is enough time to do it, but I just can't do it."

If a questionnaire had asked for sources of stress or a checklist had been provided to tick items, for example, perhaps only the concern in the second part of this quote would be revealed and we might assume that the stress was caused by worrying about coursework. However, the depth of reflection provided us with the explanation that this is linked to the diarists' eating-disorder behaviour as manifested with her largely uncontrollable addiction to chocolate. This is an addiction that finds her spending money she cannot always afford on supplies and stealing chocolate from her housemates. This behaviour makes her feel very negative about herself and further aggravates her poor self-esteem due to this lack of self-control.

Yet another example of how using the diary can reveal other aspects of the phenomena of stress is regarding "turnarounds" in thinking and ruminative thought "in action." On 3rd March, a self-confessed "pessimist" explains how she had discussions with her tutor about how to achieve a very good grade overall in her degree:

"It turns out I would need 66% this semester. At first I thought 'no way' but deep inside know it will be OK."

However, the following day on the 4th March she reports:

"I know I was feeling positive yesterday, but the more I think about it, an average of 66% seems near impossible and I don't know what to do!!! I know I need to panic and do some work, but it's easier said than done."

So, the diaries highlight that individuals may not perceive themselves as able to make choices between alternative courses of action and furthermore, that decision making regarding coping strategies is fluid and subject to revision. Other research and data-gathering approaches used for examining stress may not reflect the diverse and highly individualistic ways in which people respond to stress. For example, how certain individuals may manipulate their own emotions in order to motivate themselves into coping action, as in the illustration above.

An interesting observation is how the diary can help the writer become aware of issues, almost as if they were becoming aware of these for the first time and may be subject to "eureka" moments. For example, one female diarist remarked:

"I've always known that I was pessimistic but I didn't realise just how many negative thoughts I have on a regular basis until I looked back at my diary."

and

"I also found that I genuinely enjoyed the process of diary writing and hope to keep this up as, for me, it has some cathartic qualities, as in the past I have just suppressed feelings which has not helped me."

So, diaries can be a record of emotional reactions that have been long standing, but also that may be used as a prompt at a later date to engage that same emotion for some other purpose. One example of this came from one female diarist who explains:

"Feeling a little weepy after having read an article about trafficking in Bangladesh, don't know why I read these things, they always upset me but showing emotion makes me feel alive and makes me appreciate life. Guess I'm writing this in the diary as I'm sure I'll look back on it for some time to come and every time I read it, it will touch me and make me appreciative for what I have and the opportunities available to me. Hopefully someday I will be able to do something more proactive to help stop these heartbreaking activities and this entry will remind me to seek that challenge."

Using this kind of detailed diary means we have access to the complexity in the relationships between sources and reactions to stress. For example, one female diarist wrote:

"Felt really stressed this morning. Had dreamt about work and how crap it was going. Woke up and attempted to work but kept crying all the time. Missed my lecture... I just couldn't handle it, felt too emotional. I would have only ended up

breaking down if anyone asked me how I was. Didn't get much done at all though, as I just kept stressing out at the thought of it."

So, this shows the phenomenological nature of the stress response as it shows the self-fulfilling prophecy of worrying about a stressor, the resultant emotion, subsequent appraisal, and sense of paralysis.

One caution we must take, however, is to not assume that the open nature of the diary keeping meant that dairies were written in the writers own frame of reference. We must not forget that, due to the nature of the university course, these were not entirely private documents. From the outset, they were written with a particular readership and agenda in mind—the tutor and a possible external examiner. Running through these dairies was a strong awareness of the reader, and they often addressed comments directly to me as their tutor and reader of the diary, e.g., "Let me start again... sorry I've not told you that before have I?"

One diarist felt embarrassed that her diary might not compare well to those of others:

"Don't really have much else to report, I live a pretty boring life I guess: I bet everyone else's dairies are full of excitement and tales, whereas mine is just full of indecisiveness and regrets. Oh well—that's just me, I guess, can't change it."

How the skills in, and attitudes towards, reflective diary keeping developed over time

Via the use of this open-format diary, a number of major research advantages were experienced, as well as those of the diarists' development and well-being. It is able to capture for us the diarists' different response modes. Dairies have for their authors, an "everyday" meaning that extends beyond the context of the research. Each diarist, in spite of the coaching and training he/she received on how to keep a diary, completed the diary in different ways. Kember et al. (1999) categorise three types of reflectors: *non-reflectors* (i.e., a lack of evidence of deliberate appraisal), *reflectors* (i.e., demonstrate insight, thought analysis, discrimination, and evaluation), and *critical reflectors* (i.e., indicate a transformation from initial perspectives). For most, there was a balance between true critical reflection and more straightforward non-reflecting reporting of events. This did develop over the course of the diary keeping period as they became more proficient and open and were more convinced of the benefits of diary keeping. The open format meant diarists had some leeway to write about what was important to them. They tended to explore the interconnections between their lives, their individual characteristics, and their context increasingly as time went on.

Some diarists, regardless of the motivation to do well on the course, warmed to the task of diary keeping more than others. Sheridan (1993) suggests that some people are predisposed to be diarists. These people "have already forged for themselves an identity as that of writer, someone who keeps records, collects things, preserves the present for the future" (Sheridan, 1993:35). This can be illustrated by the following from a female diarist:

"It feels strange writing a diary here as I already have a diary addressed to my Granddad who passed away last year. I usually use it to write down my emotions, usually when I am sad. Ever since I was young, I found it difficult to express my feelings, preferring to keep them to myself and writing them down. Because I do not allow people to get close to me or to see my weaknesses. I found it very difficult to know where to begin writing my diary as there or was so much floating around my head –I don't want to miss something important out."

All of the diarists had experienced training regarding self-awareness and had completed a number of self-awareness questionnaires. Therefore, they had got used to the process of reflection on themselves and their behaviour to some extent.

Watching the dairies develop as a reflection tool and coping technique was very rewarding. For the purposes of this article, four diarists have been chosen to illustrate the development of the diary keeping over time (see Table 4).

Many expressed their concerns about their ability to write and express themselves at the start of the process as can be seen in a couple of the initial comments in the table. However, there is a change in tone as they became more proficient and appreciative of the benefits of writing and they develop their ability and comfort levels in terms of emotional disclosure. At the start most of the diarists focussed on their performance as diarists—for example, what to include, how to write it, what they should put down etc. Over time they grew in confidence and became less self-conscious—developing their own voices as critical reflectors (Kember et al., 1999). Although these were not private documents as such, this did not seem to hinder them and many even spoke directly to me in their dairies. They seemed to accept that some degree of "unpacking" of issues was going to take place and certain deeply seated aspects brought to the foreground. This is not implying that stress is usually trivialised or easily absorbed into everyday life, but that things get suppressed when more pressing concerns take over. Some started to use their dairies to document positive emotions as well as negative and many suggested that they would continue to use the diary approach in the future. One male diarist wrote:

"This is starting to help me feel less stressed. It's strange but I feel more in control by examining these various personality traits and ideas and by logging how I behave in certain situations. Its helping me see things a little more in perspective and the clearer understanding of the way I know I behave is having a very calming effect."

Table 4

Illustrations of how the attitudes towards, and use of, the diaries changed over time (time frame from left to right).

Jenny	<i>I found it so difficult initially to start writing and thinking about targets but now I feel like I could write pages and pages, also seeing it written down makes everything much clearer. I already feel proud of myself-realising little simple things that seemed so complex before. Probably couldn't say exactly what has become clear but somehow I can feel/sense it.</i>	<i>Just tend to write in here whenever I feel down or thoughtful about something.</i>	<i>Really struggling to sleep so thought I'd write in my diary to clear my head. Not really sure why I'm writing in here as it's not really related to my goals, but just feel kind of funny and need to get my feelings out. I am quite proud that this is the third time I have wrote (sic) in here today.</i>	<i>Dear Diary. Just wanted to write down what a happy mood I am in.</i>	<i>I have decided that this will be the last week I'll write in here so it will give me another week to wrap things up and I'll write up my coursework. In a way it feels quite sad that I won't write in here anymore. I usually keep a diary anyway. Because this coursework has taught me to write my feelings down when I'm happy or sad (think I'll do the same in my diary.</i>	<i>I have decided that this will be my last entry in this diary and I feel rather sad. I have shared so much in my diary.</i>
John	<i>Dear Diary... I don't really know how to start?? I have never written a diary before. It really isn't my style. I have just spent the last 10 mins staring at the screen and can only come up with this very cliché way.</i>	<i>Time 4.05 Location: still in bed. Status: Wallet empty</i>	<i>I think whilst I haven't vocally said much, my mindset is functioning a bit different now. I feel in more of a place to express myself and I think if nothing else, this diary is one big long expression of my feelings/stories in that had you not wrote them down, would still be locked away. So I am pretty happy at the moment.</i>	<i>...The main one being keeping up my diary as this alone forced me to acknowledge my emotions despite initial reluctance I managed to keep a consistent diary.</i>	<i>When my natural controlling nature is pushed to the extent of having no control, my reactions become unpredictable and I freak out...as is explained in March 4th entry regarding my brothers departure for Iraq.</i>	<i>This is the last entry for the purpose of the project but I shall continue with a stress diary. Recording how I react to stressors has been a constructive process and worth continuing. It has motivated me to achieve my goals and this has meant control over my own development.</i>
Martin	<i>So... the first day of my diary and perhaps the start of a new habit.</i>	<i>I completely forgot to do my diary yesterday. I didn't think it was appropriate to fill it in today (I mean yesterdays)as there was not much to report....on a more frustrating note, I have something to get off my chest.</i>	<i>(Going away for a few days with the lads to Amsterdam) I am not going to take my diary with me. I would love to, but I would hate to lose it, or have it read by my friends - as up to now it has been very beneficial for me to help get things off my chest that I have felt that I could not talk to anyone about.</i>	<i>I mentioned in my diary on Friday that I thought my constant worrying about work was forcing me to lose focus, become impatient... I analysed this today and found that I need to address my increasing stress levels... I came to this goal by having a look at what I have written about in my diary.</i>	<i>Back on the 13th February I began writing my diary. At the time, what I was writing was very general and poorly put together. However, as I have moved through time my diary has become not only more reflective but also more important to me.</i>	<i>After I have finished my exams I will definitely continue to keep a diary. It has given me the opportunity to get issues off my chest but it has almost been like talking to someone who has been giving me a hand to get me through the process.</i>
Mia	<i>"Dear Diary". When you hear about people writing in diaries that's what they tend to say. Feels a little weird to me, I think I'm just going to write, none of this 'dear diary' stuff, just free flow thoughts. I've never really written a diary before, I've always wanted to, bought the books and everything, just could never stick to it. Always ended up having loads of empty notebooks with just a few complete pages.</i>	<i>I realise my diary is being quite restrictive, I'm not really saying all my thoughts and feelings down about little things but I am describing the day.</i>	<i>I'm happy at this point in time so that's all that counts. It doesn't need to be perfect, it might not last, but it's happening now and I'm going to just embrace the moment.</i>	<i>I've neglected writing in this (diary) this past few days as I haven't actually done anything but lie in bed ill feeling sorry for myself.</i>	<i>Just been looking at my self monitoring diary. It's truly shameful that I can eat so much food. I've decided not to keep the diary anymore though, it just makes me feel weaker and binge more rather than motivating me in the right way.</i>	<i>I know last Friday was meant to be the last day I wrote in this diary but everything is going wrong and I just feel like I need to write it down.</i>

Although, in the main, the research on diary keeping has revealed the benefits of writing about traumatic or stressful experiences on physical and psychological health, these diaries supported Burton and King's (2004) findings on the use of writing about positive feelings and scenarios. It appears that some diarists learnt how important it is to make a note of the positive events

that take place, as it is useful to reflect on at a later date to remind oneself that it is possible, but also to create the link between a particularly useful act and a positive feeling. For example:

"I'm really pleased with myself, it's good that I have to write this down because it is helping me to make positive mental links between being confident and doing things like speaking to new people and positive experiences, so that in the future I am even better able to challenge negative thoughts."

The following extract also highlights the uses of recording positive experiences and reactions and also hints at the almost evangelical approach to diary keeping that some diarists took.

"On my way home I popped over to Tammy's. I gave her a book I had bought her for her to record her thoughts in, like this diary, as I have found it really useful in helping me to reflect on myself. She was also pleased, she had had a visit from her area manager and she said she felt so much more confident because she took some deep breaths and decided that she didn't need to take it so seriously after all. She told me how she had taken him around her section and that he was really pleased—so I told her to write it in her book because one thing I have definitely learned is that when things go wrong we imprint them on our memories and use them to help us prove to ourselves that we can't do something, but when things go right we forget about them – but if you have to write them down it helps you to be more balanced and objective about how you see yourself."

The use of the diary over a suitable time period allowed some degree of perspective taking and concept building in terms of the reasons for particular stress responses. One female reflected on the stress caused from her lack of assertiveness and where this may have originated from:

"Having been physically and emotionally bullied throughout school I have come to associate assertive communications with both violence and pain. I see how their assertiveness manifested itself into that situation and I am scared to be assertive as I don't want to cause people the suffering they caused me. I know this is irrational and I must stop making this link. If I can effectively be assertive, then there is no reason for pain, and it would eventually be less destructive and costly than being passive. Written down it makes perfect sense but in actions other thoughts cloud my concentration on the effective communication."

Once she had done this, she was able to work on the source of much of her discomfort and attempt to re-educate herself to link being assertive with positive emotions and mutual gain.

The opportunity to write about some past experiences retrospectively with added reflection was also invaluable to aid coping for a number and realisation often took place over a number of days. For example, one female explained:

"My coping mechanisms recently have been ineffective... the crying, getting angry, not sleeping and not relaxing enough... and I need to try and realise better ones. Looking back on similar periods I coped very well during my school examinations... granted I didn't have all the problems at home that I do now that cause me to worry, and my self-esteem was higher, but I also used to have a very detailed timetable that I did with friends and then stuck on my wardrobes so I could see it every day and I got great satisfaction ticking it off when I had completed things. I try to do that now, I have a list of readings for each module pinned up on my notice board, and because I have dedicated so little time to my reading this semester I have about 6 boxes ticked off out of around 66! Which probably doesn't help my stress levels looking at that every day."

So, by writing about previous stressful times when coping was more effective, she was able to evaluate her approach and the outcomes and consider bringing those coping skills forward into the present.

Conclusions

Those whose diaries have been the subject of this article experienced a range of stressors and resultant strains as they worked towards their final year examinations while making crucial choices regarding their future careers. Many of the stressors they report are in line with previous research findings; however, the use of the personal reflective diary methodology has revealed a far more substantial account of the complexities and interactions abound in the experience of stress. Using a diary this way allows sensations, thoughts, and emotions occurring in daily life to be monitored and reported with the minimum of retrospection and hence distortion. The fact that they are "diarist-driven" makes them relatively unobtrusive in the individual's natural setting (Bolger, Davies, & Rafaeli, 2003).

Some concerns may be raised regarding the researcher's lack of control over a diarist's writing frequency (Green, Rafaeli, Bolger, Shrout, & Reis, 2006), but in this particular study, participants were in a unique relationship with the researcher and were motivated to use the diary over the finite period due to a belief in the potential benefits. Findings do show that it takes time to fully develop capabilities in reflection and diary keeping, so initial selling, training, and coaching in this method are needed. As with previous research, diarists were not distracted by the intrinsically intimate nature of this form of disclosure (Bovey & Thorpe,

1986) and, indeed, were keen to have the chance to open up in this way. Hence, aside from the very beneficial research outcomes of this kind of method, there are many practical possibilities, too.

So, what makes the diaries work so effectively?

One of the reasons the diaries have such an impact is that they appear to help with sense making and gaining perspective. By seeing things clearly via the written medium, they can confront certain issues, for example:

“Before doing this I have hidden Bulimia from others and so it felt irrelevant, private and inconsequential. But having admitted it, seen it in black and white and being able to deal with it through my goal, has highlighted to me the size of the problem and how, if I don't deal with it, it could become a serious health problem.”

Reflecting and writing can help them develop their own conceptual model explaining their stress experience, leading to clarity of thought, emotional recognition, and a more balanced view of the situation.

The diaries can launch a rollercoaster of emotions, but diarists can see change day-by-day and this can have positive affective impact and motivational effect. They can also see the good and bad, side-by-side, and recording positive experiences and emotions can lead to a surge of desire to cope and try new strategies. Putting things on paper appears to calm some and helps them focus—in an almost meditative way. This is a rather safe environment to explore, and they are creating regular feedback for themselves, which is nurturing and supportive on the whole. Much of this helps some of them achieve a state of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1996) where anything seems possible and they transcend their own, and possibly others', expectations.

Specifically related to coping, this is a way to download, and as these diaries were compulsory, they had to “get back on the horse” even after a coping attempt backfired. However, they can see poor and ineffectual attempts at coping clearly and for themselves by reviewing and reflecting on the outcomes. Rather than being overly critical, their self-perceptions, mediated through the diaries, help them gain self-acceptance and encourage them to feedforward with vision and confidence for future encounters with stress.

This study yielded valuable insights into the phenomena of stress and showed how useful a reflective diary can be when an individual is under career and performance pressure. Although they may have reflected on situations that in other less reflective circumstances might not have been perceived as worthy of scrutiny, this may also be the case with other methodological approaches to the study of stress (Poppleton et al., 2008). Another pertinent issue is that, due to the nature of the reflective diaries, they did not just record but also shaped the findings. As such, the diaries were not purely objective data-gathering methods but to some extent each individual carried out his/her own piece of self-focussed action research.

It could be argued that the very essence of what is a diary is challenged here. In years gone by, diaries often came with a key that one used to lock secretly after committing one's most private thoughts and feelings for eternity in black and white. Writing the diary for someone else, in this case for research and assessment, potentially destroys the very notion of a diary as a safe personal space where one can write freely by, and for oneself. However, the nature and extent of the diaries kept for this research suggest that this is not the case here.

I will end this article with a comment from one diarist that, for me, sums up the unique impact of using a diary in this way:

“Aside from the degree to which I feel I have achieved my set objectives, the process of writing a diary proved a cathartic experience which alone I consider to be of immeasurable value within my personal journey.”

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