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Keep Calm and Carry On: The Relationships Between Cognitive Flexibility, Social Support & Anxiety in Students Transitioning to College

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Keep Calm & Carry On:

The Relationships Between
Cognitive Flexibility,
Social Support,
& Anxiety in Students
Transitioning to College

**Max Buck, Mara Smuin,
Rebecca Thornley**

Overall Purpose

Purpose: To investigate the influence of cognitive flexibility and social support on transitioning students' anxiety

Previous Research & Gaps: Although each individual variable has been studied at length, their accumulative effect has not. Additionally, our research will contribute to the other studies that have examined the wide-reaching effects of these variables



Key Terms

Cognitive Flexibility

a person's (a) awareness that in any given situation there are options and alternatives available, (b) willingness to be flexible and adapt to the situation, and (c) self-efficacy in being flexible" (Martin et al., 1998, p. 532).

Anxiety

a future-oriented mood state associated with preparation for possible, upcoming negative events (Craske et al., 2011, p.3).

Social Support

Supportive communication: verbal (and nonverbal) behaviors intended to provide or seek help" (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018, p. 54)

Social Skills Deficiency Vulnerability Model

- Overall Claim: an individual's deficit in social skills puts them at an increased risk of experiencing negative effects on their mental health
- Segrin (1996) positioned social skills as a buffer between stress and the experience of psychosocial problems
- Psychosocial problems are defined as psychological issues stemming from poor social skills (Segrin, 2000)

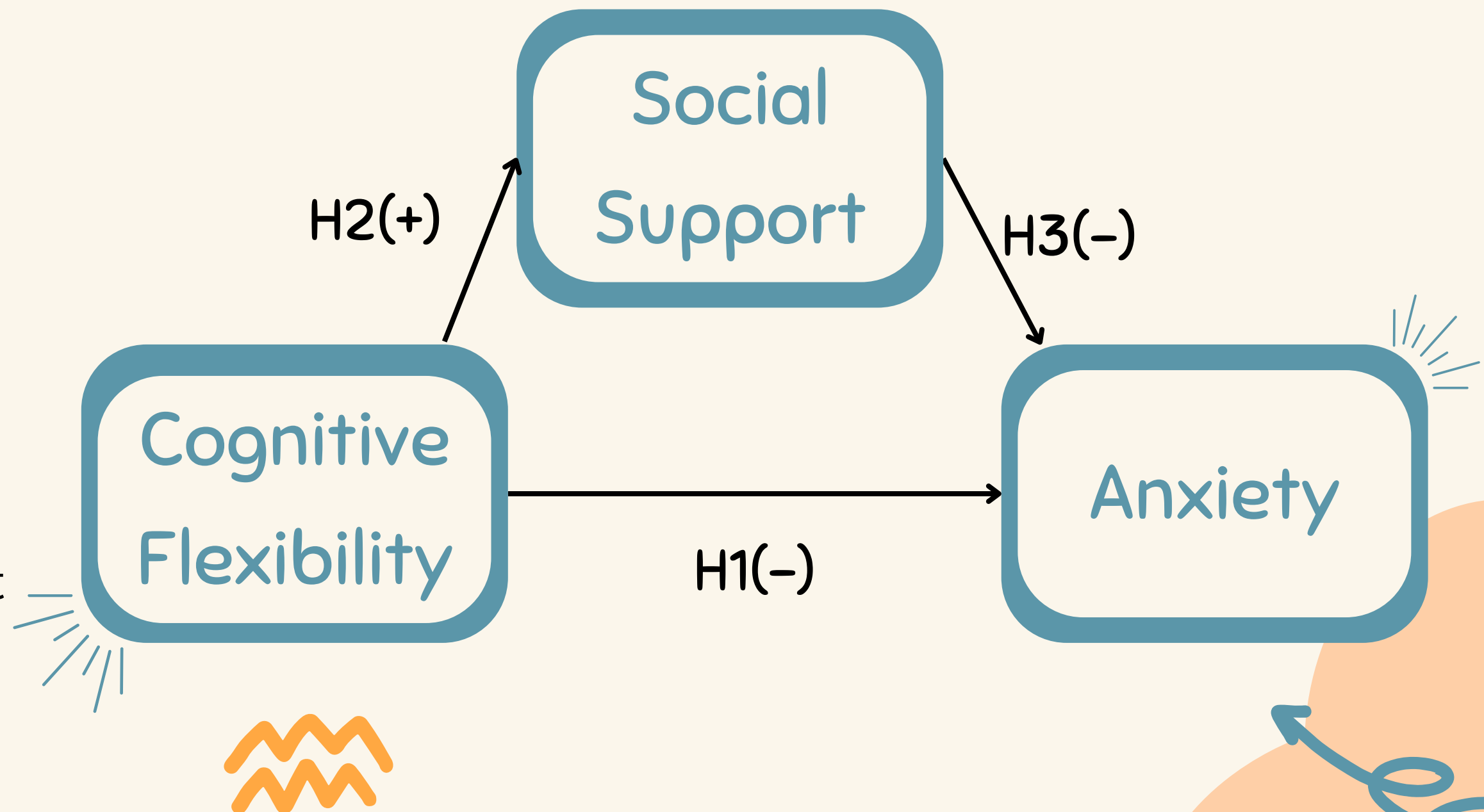


Hypotheses

H1: As an individual's cognitive flexibility increases they will experience fewer symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder

H2: As an individual's cognitive flexibility increases, their perceived social support will also increase.

H3: As an individual's social support increases, feelings of anxiety will decrease.



Participants & Procedures

Participants

- Between 18 and 25 years old
- Majority female ~ 78.2% and 21.8% male
- No non-binary individuals
- Majority white with 324 individuals out of 345

Procedures

- Participants were recruited at an orientation events for incoming freshmen
- Given \$5 amazon gift card upon completion
- Did not attend a local high school



Measures

Cognitive Flexibility.

- Cognitive Flexibility Scale (Martin & Rubin, 1995)
- $M = 3.81$, $\alpha = 0.75$

Social Support

- Multi-dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et. al., 1988)
- $M = 4.1$, $\alpha = 0.9$

Anxiety.

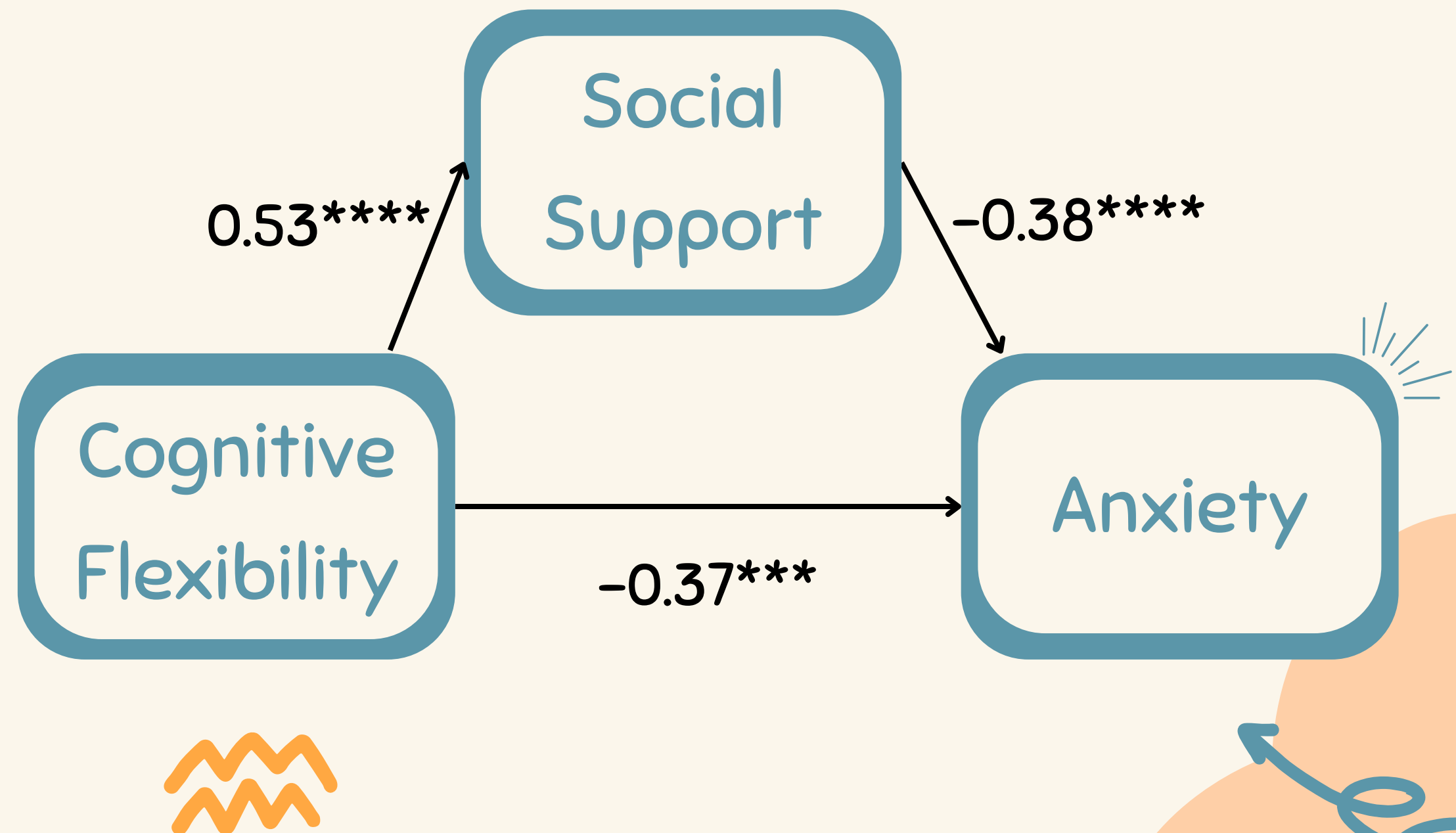
- General Anxiety Disorder Scale (Spitzer et. al., 2006)
- $M = 2$, $\alpha = 0.91$

Results

H1: As an individual's cognitive flexibility increases they will experience fewer symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder

H2: As an individual's cognitive flexibility increases, their perceived social support will also increase.

H3: As an individual's social support increases, feelings of anxiety will decrease.



Discussion

H1: As an individual's cognitive flexibility increases, they will experience fewer symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder

- Previous research has shown that an individual's social skills, including cognitive flexibility, has a strong correlation with the prevalence of anxiety. (Gabrys et al., 2018)
- Feelings of anxiety are often found or increased when transitioning to college. Due to feelings of unmet expectations and stress
- Educating incoming freshmen on new changes and introduce them to the idea of cognitive flexibility.
- This can be even better if introduced to students of all ages.



Discussion

H2: As an individual's cognitive flexibility increases, their perceived social support will also increase.

- Previous Research linked cognitive flexibility with greater overall wellbeing, cognitive abilities, emotional intelligence
- Our research findings supported our hypothesis
 - cognitive flexibility influences the formation of new relationships; greater social skills; conflict management
- Implications: Freshman orientations, introductory level courses, parent meetings, and mental health professionals

Discussion

H3: As an individual's social support increases, feelings of anxiety will decrease.

- Previous research has shown that social support positively associated with health and longevity (Berkman & Smye, 1979, Haslam, et al., 2009, McNamara et al., 2021)
- Our results support the idea that this extends to mental health and wellbeing
- Use social support questionnaire when receiving patients in student health centers



Limitations

- Volunteer Bias
- Self-Perception
- Correlation, not Causation
- Specific Real Area Bias
- Majority White-Identifying
- All Male and Female-Identifying

Future Research: correct for limitations, examine relationships in reverse, examine CF and SS in relation to other mental health concerns



Conclusion

Transition is integral to human experience. Greater cognitive flexibility linked with fewer symptoms of anxiety, greater social support. Greater social support linked with less anxiety.

Implementation should be considered in: **mental health services, student health centers, and orientations**

