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## The partial mediation role of sensory processing sensitivity in the association between academic stress and depression in university students

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### Abstract

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) is defined as a personality trait which is associated with a strengthened sensitivity to the environmental influence, enhanced awareness, empathy, self-reflection and depth of sensory processing. This trait, in stressful environments, has been associated with negative outcomes, such as mental health disturbances. However, little is known about the impact of this trait in stressful contexts such as the university. The main aim of the present study is to analyze the association between academic stress, SPS and depression, in a sample of 801 Spanish university students (girls  $n=617$ ) with a mean age of 19.33 years ( $SD=4.32$ ). An electronic evaluation protocol was administered to students including a sociodemographic questionnaire, the Highly Sensitive Person Scale for the evaluation of SPS, the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 for the assessment of depression and the Stressor Academic Scale. The obtained results exhibited positive and significant correlations between academic stress and SPS ( $r=.456$ ,  $p<.0001$ ) and depression ( $r=.426$ ,  $p<.0001$ ). Moreover, SPS was significantly associated to depression ( $r=.411$ ,  $p<.0001$ ). The conducted mediation analysis showed a partial mediation effect of SPS in the association between academic stress and depression (indirect effect=1.373, CI: .9730-1.796). Based on the results derived from this study, university students with higher levels of SPS are at increased risk of mental health problems, which can have a serious impact on their academic performance. Hence, educational interventions should be implemented from an inclusive perspective to reduce the impact of SPS on health and teaching-learning processes in university context.

**Keywords:** academic stress; depression, sensory processing sensitivity; university; students