

Stress Coping Strategies among University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Students nowadays are always exposed to different kinds of stress that are related to academic, family, or relationship issues. Experiencing stress can have a negative impact on their mental health and personal well-being. It is important for students to know the coping strategies in order to prevent their stress levels from becoming more serious. This research was conducted to identify how university students cope with their stress. The present study employed a quantitative method by conducting an online survey that was completed by a total of 404 university students from a selected public university in Malaysia. The findings show that students use different types of coping strategies to manage their stress. Most of the students frequently used cognitive strategies, followed by behavioral and emotional ones. Three strategies were not used significantly differently by gender except for emotional coping which was used more often by female students. It is interesting to note that most of the male students tend to use significantly more behavioral strategies. Male students also were found to seek professional help significantly more than female students. This has implications for the policy maker in students' welfare departments in higher education institutions, and educators to be aware of students' psychological issues and students themselves in terms of their well-being. Apart from that, this study suggests a qualitative study should be conducted to gain in-depth information from the students on coping strategies.

Keywords: Academic Stress, Coping Strategy, Higher Education, Stress Management

Introduction

Stress among university students is a serious issue to understand as it can have an effect on personal well-being. Stress also can lead to emotional distress, burnout, academic failure, and dropout among students (Gibbons, 2010; Pillay & Bundhoo, 2011; Irshad, Saleem & Mahmood, 2015; Pozos-Radillo et al., 2014; Aisyah, Raishan & Mohd Azhar, 2021; Hossain, Alam & Masum, 2022). Stress happens when internal and external pressures go beyond the individual capability to cope with the situation. Extreme stress can lead to clinical depression if the coping mechanism is not being used effectively. People suffering from depression would have cognitive conflict about themselves, the future, and the world around them (Mohd Zaliridzal, Nurul Izzati, Abdul Rashid, Nurhafizah, Muhammed Fauzi, & Mohd Azhar, 2021; Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021). In addition, there are two categories of stress (Yusoff, 2010). The first one is eustress. Eustress is a good stress that encourages an individual to continue with

what they are doing, for instance, working and studying. This good stress can enhance learning whereas an ideal level of stress can increase learning ability. The other category of stress is distress, which is defined as negative stress in which an event is perceived as threatening and harmful to the individual. The stress level can be low, moderate, or high. It depends on how individuals interpret the situation. The level of stress for students can come from several categories which are personal, academic, and environmental factors (Essel & Owusu, 2017). Among university students, one of the common factors contributing to stress is when students feel the need to obtain good results in their studies (Dada, Babatunde & Adeleye, 2018; Nur Hamizah, Masoumeh, Seyed, & Atefeh; 2018). The pressure to perform and handle many academic tasks often makes students distressed.

According to The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) in the year 2017, the state of psychological well-being among Malaysian teenagers had gotten more critical. The data on students' issues found that 50% of 120,420 students faced 11 personal problems that include exam stress, 29% faced family problems, 11% faced issues with friends, and 10% faced problems with their educators. Coping is important as a stabilizing factor that may help an individual in psychosocial adaptation during stressful conditions. Different people have their own way to cope with stress (Ganesan, Talwar, Norsiah Fauzan, & Oon, 2018; Nur Syuhada, Norwaziah, & Hafawati, 2021). Therefore, dealing with stress during university is considered quite difficult for some students. The coping mechanism plays a significant part in overcoming the stress experienced by individuals. Most studies about stress in Malaysia focus on the factor of stress and the population involved medical students (Yusoff, Rahim & Yaacob, 2010; Salam et al., 2015; Yusoff, Rahim & Yaacob, 2010; Ahmad, Yusoff & Razak, 2011). However, there is a lack of studies investigating stress-coping strategies in general. It is not known what kinds of strategies students use when they have problems. Thus, this study aims to identify the ways undergraduate students in a Malaysian university cope with their stress.

Literature Review

A study conducted by Ji et al. (2011) indicates that psychological burdens lead to stress among university students. It showed that there is a positive correlation between the well-being of the students and the study environment. Another study by Krypel and Henderson-King (2010) found that higher levels of stress lead to an increase in efforts to have coping strategies. A similar study from Yoo (2019) analyzed the multidimensional model of coping strategies on 471 samples and found that academic stress-esteem, problem coping strategies, behaviour coping strategies, and emotional coping strategies as the main choice of coping strategies. The study reported that coping strategy has been found to have various ways to cope with stress such as trying to deal with the root cause of stress, denying having stress, and distracting self from stress. Similarly, Sajid et al. (2017) found that in their study, most of the students have their own preferred coping strategies which are sleeping, having sports, having entertainment (music and movies), and hanging out with friends. Those mentioned are considered positive ways of coping strategies.

Furthermore, Maryam (2017) claims that coping is a behavioural response to stress that has been carried out by an individual who gets the psychological burden to manage conflicts in order for them to get a better life. Another study conducted by Hasan & Tumah (2019) found that respondents employed various coping strategies with each other. However, students need to first identify their own types of stress in order to develop effective coping strategies and problem-solving skills that can improve. A study conducted by Honglin et al. (2009) and Conley et al. (2020) found that psychological well-being was found to be negatively

connected to students' stress and stress coping strategies students significantly moderated the relationship between students' stress and mental health. In addition, male students' level of stress, negative mental well-being, and a low tendency to choose positive coping strategies as compared to female students. In a similar study by Misra and Castillo (2004), the male student might have different ways of coping strategies, unlike the female students who have chosen emotion oriented as their coping strategies such as crying.

According to Lazarus & Folkman (1984) in their psychological stress model, coping can be explained as the cognitive and behavior efforts in managing psychological stress. Precisely, coping can be defined as an individual process using various strategies as the status of an individual-environment relationship changes. In certain situations, when an individual received something that might be unchangeable, that particular person might use an emotional coping strategy to deal with the situation.

Methodology

Research Design

This quantitative research was conducted to study the stress and coping strategies among college students. The researcher looked into the socio democratic profile of the participants and the coping strategies used by university students to deal with stress. The research has sufficient fact finding and interpretations.

Respondents

A total of 404 undergraduate students submitted their responses to the survey. For the purpose of analysis, a few incomplete answers were found here and there, thus the inconsistent amount of data for analysis was noted throughout the results. The respondents studied at a public university in various faculties of Science & Technology (85, 21.0%), Social Science & Humanities (270, 66.8%), and Business & Management (49, 12.1%). The majority of the respondents are female (327, 80.9%) and the minority is male (77, 19.1%). In terms of age, the majority of the young adults are between 21 – 24 years old (334, 82.7%), and a small number range from 18 – 20 years of age (39, 9.7%) and 25 – 29 years old (31, 7.7%). A small number of the respondents were from diploma studies (25, 6.2%) while the rest were at degree level (379, 93.8). Respondents came from various semesters of study (first to eighth semester).

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was developed by the researchers in the effort to include items that are relevant to the targeted population. The items were refined from previous studies and adapted to suit the current study. Students rated the frequency or extend they have experienced symptoms. sources and coping strategies in the recent weeks on a 5-point-Likert scales. The Likert Scale asks how much a person agrees or disagrees with a particular statement or question. This survey used a 5 point rating scale ranging from 1 – Never, 2 - Rarely, 3 -Sometimes, -Very often, and 5 – Always.

The items are shown to have high reliability indicated by high Cronbach alphas, implying that the items are good and dependable. In short, the instrument consists of four different aspects of coping: cognitive coping (alpha = .950, 6 items); emotional coping (alpha = .947, 6 items); behavioral coping (alpha = .857, 17 items); and ineffective coping (alpha = .767, 10 items).

Data collection

The survey was uploaded into an online survey tool and distributed to student representatives. The researchers had no control over how many students would respond to the online survey even when they receive the access link address. For this current report, the survey was distributed during the final weeks of the semester.

Data analysis

The data was keyed into SPSS to compute descriptive and inferential analysis. Mean and standard deviation was used to describe the level of coping that students used. Welch's test was conducted to compare means between male and female students since the number of samples in both groups are not equal. Welch's t-test assumes that both groups of data are sampled from populations that follow a normal distribution, but it does not assume that those two populations have the same variance. The data for this study had fulfilled the assumptions of which include independence of the observations. Each subject should belong to only one group; no significant outliers in the two groups; and the data for each group be approximately normally distributed.

Results

The main purpose of this paper is to determine the types of coping students used. The highest type used is cognitive coping (mean = 3.71, SD = .76), followed by behavioral coping (mean = 3.35, SD = .56), emotional coping (mean = 2.88, SD = .70), and ineffective coping (mean = 2.55, SD = .58).

When scrutinizing the specific ways students deal with their stress, Table 1 delineates that students used each of the strategies at equal frequency: sometimes, not too often. They re-evaluate what is important in life; try to encourage themselves and look at those less fortunate; accept what has happened; try to analyze the problem in order to understand it better; look for the good side of things; and think of a strategy to handle the problem.

Table 1

Items in Cognitive Coping

	N	Mean	S.D
I reevaluate what is important in life.	370	3.84	.988
I try to encourage myself and look at those less fortunate	370	3.79	.988
I accept what has happened	370	3.78	.990
I try to analyze the problem in order to understand it better	370	3.71	.930
I look for the good side of things	370	3.67	.976
I think of a strategy to handle the problem	370	3.67	1.041

For emotional coping, the most often technique used to relieve stress was crying and talking to others to get emotional support. On a rarely basis, they seek social support, they try to enjoy the stress, they write to express feelings (diary/letter/social media), and scream/shout to relieve emotions (refer to Table 2).

Table 2

Items in Emotional Coping

	N	Mean	S.D
I cry to relieve my emotion	368	3.61	1.316
I talk to people to get emotional support	368	3.27	1.137
I seek social support	368	2.73	1.196
I try to enjoy the stress	368	2.71	1.097
I write to express my feelings (diary/letter/social media)	368	2.55	1.334
I scream/shout to relieve my emotion	368	2.40	1.294

Students took different actions to relieve their stress. Table 3 shows a list of strategies to cope with stress. Very often the respondents pray, listen to music, and do something that they like. Sometimes they sleep and take enough rest, do something enjoyable with food (cooking, eating out, buy favourite dish), smile, watch movies, go out with friends/ family, try to make the situation better, remove self from the stressful situation, read religious scripts or books, and learn how to manage time properly. It can be seen that students rarely go for recreational activity, take a vacation, exercise or play sport as a strategy to manage with their stress. Definitely, not many rated “seeking professional help like psychologists or counsellors” as an option to relieve stress. It can be seen that seeking professional help is the last resort and not a popular choice among the respondents.

Table 3

Items in Behavioural Coping

	N	Mean	S.D
I pray	366	4.46	.902
I listen to music	366	4.25	.975
I do something that I like	366	4.09	1.003
I sleep and take enough rest	365	3.87	1.019
I do something enjoyable with food (cooking, eating out, buy favorite dish)	365	3.86	1.095
I smile	366	3.83	1.084
I watch movies	366	3.63	1.143
I go out with friends/ family	366	3.63	1.127
I try to make the situation better.	365	3.62	1.030
I remove myself from the stressful situation	366	3.59	1.045
I read religious scripts or books	366	3.33	1.169
I learn how to manage time properly	365	3.32	1.036
I go for recreational activity	364	2.53	1.053
I take a vacation	366	2.51	1.080
I exercise	364	2.50	1.059
I play sport	366	2.38	1.187
I seek professional help like psychologists or counselors	366	1.49	.823

Finally, in terms of behavioral coping, students sometimes turn to other activities to distract the mind, criticize self, blame self for things that has happened, move on as if nothing had happened. On a rare basis, they overeat to relieve stress, just refuse to believe what has

happened, just give up, and they believe that this is somebody's fault. A small number of respondents did admit to hurting themselves but luckily this strategy is last on the list.

Table 4

Items in Behavioral Coping

	N	Mean	S.D
I turn to other activities to distract my mind	365	3.50	.999
I criticize myself	365	3.22	1.162
I blame myself for things that has happened	365	3.05	1.186
I move on as if nothing had happened	365	3.03	1.024
I overeat to relieve stress	365	2.76	1.215
I just refuse to believe what has happened	365	2.53	1.034
I just give up	365	2.40	1.071
Believing that this is somebody's fault	365	2.15	.941
Believing that God is unfair	364	1.51	.934
I hurt myself (cut myself, taking pills)	365	1.33	.843

Another trend of analysis investigated if there exist significant differences between gender in any of the coping strategies. Welch's test was conducted since the number of sample size is not balanced where the ratio was one male to 3 females. Only a few differences were found to be statistically significant.

Means for coping with stress by "enjoying the stress" showed statistically significant difference, $t(1, 97.96) = 6.57, p = 0.01$. The mean usage in female group was 2.64 (SD = 1.07), whereas the mean in male group was 3.03 (SD = 1.17). This indicates that male students enjoyed their stress significantly more than their female counterparts.

Means for coping with stress by "crying to relieve emotion" showed statistically significant difference, $t(1, 97.96) = 6.57, p = 0.00$. The mean usage in female group was 3.86 (SD = 1.19), whereas the mean in male group was 2.56 (SD = 1.30). As expected, female students used crying as a stress reliever more than male students do.

Writing to express feelings (diary/letter/social media) also showed significant difference between male and female students $t(1, 104.46) = 10.25, p = 0.00$. Female students used this technique significantly more (mean=2.66, SD=1.32) than the male students (mean=2.10, SD=1.31).

When analyzing behavioral coping using Welch's test, nine strategies were found to be significantly used by male versus female students. Female students practiced these strategies more often than male students: doing something enjoyable with food (cooking, eating out, buy favorite dish), watching movies, as well as sleeping and taking enough rest.

Male students practiced these strategies more often than female students: smiling, seeking professional help like psychologists or counsellors, playing sport, exercising, and going for recreational activity.

Discussion

Significant social and academic pressures in higher education can be a challenge for any student. Majority of students studying in university reported symptoms of anxiety and high level of stress (Lawton, 2019). Pozos-Radillo et al. and colleagues (2014) analyzed relationship between stress and gender. They found that female students have higher level of chronic stress especially caused by academic situations related to assignments compared

to male students. High stress can contribute to negative health and psychosomatic diseases such as migraine, low immune system and heart-related problems. The quality of student life can also be affected when they experience insomnia, high anxiety and depression (Pereira et al., 2018). Managing academic demands can certainly create stress for university students. Classroom coursework and exams have been shown to predict high-level chronic stress among university students (Pozos-Radillo et al., 2014). Conley et al. (2020) found that student adjustment generally worsens across the first 2 years in the domains of psychological functioning where they experienced decreased self-esteem; increased depression, anxiety, and stress. Female students were reported to experience poor psychological functioning where they had more distress and lower self-esteem) during first years of college. For male students, they reported poor friend support. University management such as mental health professionals and lecturers need to be aware of the stress phenomenon among students because it produces harmful effects on the well-being of university students.

The findings of this study show that students use different types of coping strategies to manage their stress. Most of the students frequently used cognitive strategies, followed by behavioural and emotional. Comparative, findings regarding coping strategies among Polish students reported predominantly use of acceptance, planning and seeking emotional support. Their least used strategies were substance use, denial, behavioral disengagement, and religious coping.

Three strategies were not used significantly different by the gender except for emotional coping which was used more often by female students. It is interesting to note that most of male students tend to use significantly more behavioural strategies. Male students also were found to seek professional help significantly more than female students. These results are not dissimilar to other findings in the area of coping. A 4-year longitudinal study by Conley and her colleagues (2020) found that students used less cognitive-affective strategies, less active emotional coping but more increased avoidant emotional coping. In addition, their social adjustment worsens when they reported decreased social support from friends. Male had less friend support, used less active emotional coping while dependent on avoidant emotional coping throughout college.

Another study by Crăciun (2013) demonstrated that women prefer coping strategies oriented towards emotions whereas men prefer coping strategies oriented to task. A study by Freire et al. (2020) identified four approach coping used by the respondents of university students (a) low generalized use of approach coping strategies; (b) dominant use of social approach coping approaches; (c) dominant use of cognitive approach coping approaches; and (d) high generalized use of approach coping strategies. The profile showed that combination of the three strategies was associated with higher sense of general self-efficacy. In another study, university students in Polish were found to use active coping strategies: planning, positive reframing, religious coping, emotional support seeking, instrumental support seeking, self-distraction, venting of emotions, and a little of self-blame (Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021). The higher the frequency of active coping, the lower the frequency of behavioral disengagement. Their data also show that the senior students used active coping strategies more often than did the younger students, in order to solve the problem causing difficult internal tension rather than to avoid the situation altogether.

The findings of this study and other investigations related to stress and coping strategies highlight the importance of support programs for university students to negotiate with their stress. Preventive and intervention programs can include awareness about sources of stress and coping strategies especially in the freshman and junior years. The transition period from

school to university life has been shown to create pressures and stress for many students. Techniques to cope with stress should include all types of strategies namely cognitive, emotional and behavioral.

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