

# COPING STRATEGIES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN GEORGIAN CONTEXT

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## Abstract

*Studies in university students' coping strategies have their peculiarities due to particularly acute stresses characteristic of this period of life. On the other hand, there are specific limits regarding the nature of stressors and the lack of coping ability in this period. Due to such limits, it is necessary to consider different approaches to university students' stressors. Research into university students' coping strategies has been done in various countries, but this is the first such study done in Georgia. Within the transactional stress concept of Lazarus, we tested the stress buffering effects of various coping strategies such as task-, emotion-, and avoidance-oriented coping strategies, praying, and social support.*

*Within the framework of the research, 252 university students from a wide variety of disciplines and with an average age of 21 were surveyed. The methods applied in the study are the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) by Endler & Parker (Endler & Parker, 1990) and the Stress Life Inventory (SRRS) by Holmes and Rahe (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) combined with the Kucher Adolescent Depression Scale KADS -6 (Brooks et al., 2003). Results show expected main effects: There are different coping strategies used in different critical life events. Coping strategies such as social support and praying have a stress-buffering effect and prove to be situational resources in cases of strong stress. Certain coping strategies such as task-oriented coping, emotional coping and praying are predictors of psychological well-being.*

**Key words:** coping strategies, critical life event, social support, student, university, well-being.

## Introduction

The life of university students has always been challenging. According to Hammer, Grigsby and Woods (1998), university students often regard their academic life as stressful and demanding. Stresses occur when one confronts a situation perceived as overwhelming and impossible to cope with (Agolla and Ongori, 2009). The study enables to conclude that 60% of students or more are subject to high levels of stress (Markrides et al 1998).

There are different sources of stress in the lives of all humans. Some authors suggest that a certain amount of stress is important for personal growth and development (McEwen, 1998). In this case, it is a positive side of stress that matters, but if the stress is too strong and the person is unable to cope with it, then it can have a negative impact on students' mental and physical health (Houtman et al., 2007).

The study conducted among the international student population in the USA (Yang & Clum, 1994) showed certain common features in different cultural, social, religious and political environments, where they lived before they became university students. For example, most students surveyed in this study came to the USA temporarily to receive education and achieve academic success. Most of these students came to the USA from a variety of countries and found themselves far from their traditional social support and family resources. The lives of a majority of them were full of stressful situations due to cultural differences (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). There are a lot of sources of stress: Language learning, adaptation to a new educational and social environment in a short period, and so forth. In addition, they need financial support, which is not always simple enough for students, which results in feeling pressure and

experiencing stresses (Mori, 2000). The lack of social support and high academic achievements and financial difficulties are a short list of critical life events, which international students studying in the United States experienced.

The researches in Malaysia (Yet-Mee Lim, et al., 2013) showed that high college students, regardless of gender or ethnic background, were facing a variety of stressors in their lives. This is not a matter of surprise since student life in the modern era is not so simple. Their stresses could come from various sources such as health, finances, and academic and romantic relationships (Hashim, 2007), deadlines, and adaptation to the new environment. Coping strategies are moderated by the influence of stresses on the health of students (Yet-Mee Lim et al., 2013).

University students are able to reduce the negative impact of stresses, when they know how to cope with them. Coping strategy is a human ability to resolve problems or to manage problematic situations. The problem-oriented coping, emotional coping, and social support are effective strategies for managing stressful situations (Kohlman et al., 1997; Turashvili & Japaridze, 2012).

### *Problem of Research*

The period of higher education in the age from 18 to 23 is important in psychological and social development. In this period, young people face many stressful situations such as expectations of increased independence from their families and adults, adoption of social roles on their own, and the need to meet academic requirements, choose professions and prepare for adult life (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, coping patterns employed in this period are important, since they directly affect individuals' subjective well-being and satisfaction with life (Turashvili & Japaridze, 2012). The aforementioned indicators of stress and coping strategies may be different in different cultures. Individuals in collectivistic cultures are subject to many demands of the family and community and therefore, may feel less freedom and autonomy in achieving goals. At the same time, they may have weaker abilities to determine the course of their own lives (Imedadze & Ksovrelashvili, 2003).

### *Research Focus*

In the article about psychological well-being among Georgian students (Turashvili & Japaridze, 2012), were showed the importance of certain coping strategies used by university students. Below is presented the discussion of the frequency of using coping strategies in the student age and new coping strategies - social support, and praying. It was expected that both strategies would be very important irrespective of their cultural, social, and religious background.

## **Methodology of Research**

### *General Background of Research*

Coping with stress is classified under three general categories in scientific literature: Problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping (Folkman et al., 1986), and avoidance (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2000) patterns. It is impossible to make a distinction between these patterns as good or bad.

Problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and social support are some of the common coping strategies one may use to deal with stressful situations (Kohlman et al., 1997). Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, reported the effect of social support and stress on the coping capability, but the effectiveness of coping strategies depends on internal and external factors.

*Sample of Research*

Participants were a sample of 252 university students aged from 18 to 23 (average age of 21), 183 females and 69 males, from a wide variety of disciplines at five Georgian universities. The respondents were chosen using simple random selection. The students completed Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS) by Endler & Parker and the Stress Life Inventory by Holmes and Rahe combined with the Well-Being Inventory by Ryff and Kucher Adolescent Depression Scale (KADS -6). The students represented two age groups: (1) 17-19, N= 139, (2) 20 and above, N= 113.

*Instruments and Procedures*

The Research instrument was the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS, Endler & Parker, 1990.) It differentiated between three types of coping: emotion-oriented, task-oriented, and avoidant, together with the additional type of turning to religion (Carver, C.S., Scheier, M.F., Weintraub, J.K. 1989). Coping was assessed using 19 items in total. The format of each item was a four-point frequency scale, ranging from 1 - "not at all" to 4 - "completely".

The Kucher Adolescent Depression Scales (KADS-6) is a self-report scale specifically designed for the diagnosis and assessment of the severity of adolescent depression.

All participants provided information on their age, gender, socio-economic status of their families, and geographic regions. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. It took about an hour to complete the questionnaire.

*Data Analysis*

The descriptive and correlation research analysis was used in the current study. Chi-Square Test of Association, multiple linear regressions, Contingency Coefficient, T-test and Anova were used to assess the factors, which allowed to determine whether the averages of two or more samples were significantly different and Pearson's correlation was used to determine which factors were influencing each other. Regression analysis helped to develop a model coping strategy predicting well-being. The statistic SPSS-20 program was used to process the results.

**Results of Research**

Using the statistic data indicating 25th percentile (Q1), four levels of each coping strategies were identified: Very low, low, high, and very high. The results shows that on the high level of coping strategies, 15.1% of students have task-oriented coping, 23.8% emotional coping, 19.1% avoidance coping, and 32.1% praying.

Within the research, social support and praying as coping strategies for psychological well-being were analyzed. There are no age differences in using all these strategies. It was analyzed social support and praying as coping strategies for psychological well-being. In the questionnaire, social support was presented with one item: "Ask someone for help". The study showed no significant influence in this regard. The contingency coefficient of social support on the depression scale was  $C=0,123$ ,  $p < 0,919$ . The results show that on average, female students use praying as a coping strategy more frequently than male students ( $t=4.205$ ,  $p=0.012$ ;  $df=250$ ).

Another factor of analysis were the coping strategies of students from different regions of Georgia. The information is important, because some students from different regions are studying at universities in Tbilisi. In this regard, we had two groups, Tbilisi and other regions. The aim of the study was to show whether coping strategies in stressful life events differed for the groups. The results showed that students from regions are more likely to use the avoidance

coping strategy than students from Tbilisi ( $t=-288, p=0.019; df=249$ ). There are no differences in the use of other coping strategies: task oriented:  $t= 1.024, p=0.759; df=249$ , emotional:  $t= 0.370, p=0.998; df=249$ , praying:  $t= 12.489, p=0.298; df=250$ ).

Another way of analyzing the correlation between coping strategies and psychological well-being was to view coping strategies as predictors of psychological well-being. Multiple linear regressions were used to develop a model coping strategy predicting well-being adjusted for gender. The linear regression model consisting of coping strategies as independent variables predicted levels of well-being (model  $R^2=.247, p<.000$ ). This model accounts for 25% of the total variance in baseline well-being: task-oriented: model  $R^2=.25, p<.000; b=.286, p<.000$ ; emotion-oriented: model  $R^2=.25, p<.000; b=-.377, p<.000$ ; praying: model  $R^2=.25, p<.000; b=.111, p<.057$ ; and social support: model  $R^2=.25, p<.000; b=-.173, p<.004$ . The linear equation for well-being determined by this analysis is as follows:  $wellbeing=222,091+3,022task+-2,535emotion+2,867praying+-5,135social\ support$ . Research has shown that the more frequently task-oriented coping and praying strategies are used in complicated stressful situations, the higher is the indicator of psychological well-being and the more rarely emotion-oriented coping is used, the higher is psychological well-being. According to our results, avoidance-oriented coping is not a predictor of psychological well-being (model  $R^2=.247, p<.000, b=-.024, p<.0676$ ).

## Discussion

The main aim of this study was to identify the coping strategies used in different critical life events and their *stress-buffering effect*.

It was found that regardless of their cultural, social and religious backgrounds, praying is an important coping strategy for Georgian students managing stressful situations. This strategy has a stress-buffering effect and has proved to be a situational resource under a strong stress. There are gender differences in using praying as a coping strategy. Female students are more likely to use this strategy in stressful situations than male students.

Although scientific literature regards social support as one of the most important coping strategies in student age that influences psychological well-being (Kohlman et al., 1997), no significant correlations were found between social support and psychological well-being in our study. Students use social support as a coping strategy in critical life events, but it has no significant influence on psychological well-being. Contingency coefficient of social support according to the depression scale is  $C=0.123, p < 0.919$ . This may be explained by the fact that in the questionnaire, social support is represented only with one item: "Ask someone for help". In our next study, we will focus on the assessment of the importance of social support for psychological well-being.

There are different strategies irrespective of regional background. Students from regions living and studying in Tbilisi are likely to use avoidance coping strategy more often than students from Tbilisi. In this case, it may be a mechanism for defense, because students from regions usually live alone or with their relatives and avoidance coping may be the easiest method for stress management. In other respects, there are no differences between these groups in the use of coping strategies in stressful life events.

Certain coping strategies such as rational action were perceived as effective coping responses by respondents (McCrae & Costa, 1996). Various studies confirm that religious people are more aware of the essence and importance of life (Polner, 1989), even when they experience important stressful life events (McIntosh et al., 1993). Religion is able to eradicate negative events or increase positive events in human lives.

The results show that certain coping strategies such as task-oriented coping (0.000), emotional coping (0.000) and praying (0.057) are predictors of psychological well-being. The more frequently students use task-oriented coping and praying in stressful situations, the more significant is their psychological well-being. As regards emotional coping, if increased, it leads

to a decrease in psychological well-being.

Avoidance coping is not a predictor of psychological well-being (0.676). In our results published in the journal *Problems of Education in the 21 Century*, (Turashvili & Japaridze, 2012), students, who use the avoidance coping strategy have high indicators on the scale of depression (0.001), but the use of this strategy does not influence the indicators of psychological well-being.

The research in student coping strategies can be useful for universities, because the period of higher education in the age of 18-23 is important from the viewpoint of psychological and social development.

## Conclusions

In this study results show expected main effects: There are different coping strategies used in different critical life events. Coping strategies such as social support and praying have a stress-buffering effect and prove to be situational resources in cases of strong stress. Certain coping strategies such as task-oriented coping, emotional coping and praying are predictors of psychological well-being. The more frequently students use task-oriented coping and praying in stressful situations, the more significant is their psychological well-being. Avoidance coping is not a predictor of psychological well-being, use of this strategy does not influence the indicators of psychological well-being. Students from regions living and studying in Tbilisi are likely to use avoidance coping strategy more often than students from Tbilisi.

This study was one of the first to systematically examine stress, coping and psychological well-being in the student age. Finding warrant replication due to one important limitation that can be addressed in future research using improved methodology of social support as a coping strategy, in previous study social support was presented with one item: "Ask someone for help". Finally, this study focused on coping as individual attributes; future research should examine the role of external social support systems.

In sum, the ways in which students cope with stress is key. Teaching students to use positive coping strategies more frequently may help buffer the negative impact of stress on psychological well-being and on mental health outcomes.

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