

Effect of Problem-Focused and Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies on Academic Stress during Examinations

Dr Vikas Kamble [1]

Abstract:

A college student has to face a cut-throat competition and a number of other demands throughout the graduation. These demands lead to academic stress among them. If students can cope effectively with academic stress then can enjoy their college life. The present study aimed to investigate the effect of coping strategies on academic stress of college students. Participants for this study included 600 undergraduate students. Data was obtained through Academic Stress Scale for College Students and Ways of Coping Questionnaire. The data was analysed through one-way ANOVA, and Scheff's post hoc multiple comparison tests. Results indicated that coping strategies significantly affect the academic stress level of college students. Scheff's Post- hoc test revealed that students those who are not using any kind of coping strategies are suffer from academic stress in a vast amount. Moreover, students those who are using emotion focused coping strategies during examination period are better tackle with stress compare to those who are using problem focused strategies.

Key Words: Academic Stress, Problem Focused and Emotion Focused Strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Coping can be described as an effort made by an individual to eliminate or master the stressful situation so that his physical and psychological survival is ensured (Srivastava Sumitra, 1988). Coping shows the struggle of an individual for existence, because prolonged stress makes physical and psychological damage. Coping is not a one-time response; it is a process in which an individual uses various techniques to adjust with environment. Moreover, coping is not any specific form of reactions or efforts, whereas, any effort that makes a situation less demanding to be called coping. Moreover, sometimes these reactions are in concrete form and sometimes in abstract form. It means that a person who is in stressful situation, he may fight or run away from situation, and cry or think on it (cognitive reaction) that how to solve this condition. Coping is a process which involves adaptive changes. It means, coping aimed at restoring the homeostasis that is disturbed by stress. In simple words, a person who gets in trouble wants to establish the adjustment to the demands of the environment. An individual has many options to deal with stress. If one option disappears, then other may come into use for an individual, it is called adaptation. Suppose a student, during his annual examination, wishes to study at night but suddenly electrically goes off and he is unable to read the book, some level of stress may arise for him. Suppose more, there is no option to read the book, in such situation this student may recall what he read before a moment. This process is called adaptation.

Smt. Kasturbai Walchand College (Arts-Science), Sangli, Maharashtra)

Some researchers view coping as an ego state (Vaillant, 1977), others as stable personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1989), and still other researchers focus on coping as a transactional process (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980). They also suggest most popular definition of coping. They also suggest that "Coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person."

The above definition focuses on thoughts and actions that we use to deal with stress. As well as, this definition implies that this is a process rather than trait. Moreover, coping is an active effort and it is not an automatic adaptive response. Psychologist with trait approach suggests that coping based on the belief that coping is habitual problem solving thoughts and actions (Penley, Tomaka, & Wiebe, 2002).

II. COPING STRATEGIES

Coping strategy refers to a technique of coping adopted in a specific context. Most coping strategies fall into two broad categories. First category is problem-focused coping strategy, used to tackle the problem directly. Second is emotion-focused coping strategy, used to handle feelings of distress, rather than the actual problem. It is seen that, college students mostly use the problem focused coping strategy to deal with stress, but the types of coping strategies students employ may depend upon the coping resources available to them.

[1] Smt. Kasturbai Walchand College (Arts-Science), Sangli, Maharashtra

Higgins and Endler, (1995) grouped coping strategies into three main classes: the task-oriented, emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented. The task-oriented strategy is problem-focused strategy (Kariv & Heiman, 2005).

Avoidance-oriented coping includes strategies such as avoiding the situation, denying its existence, or losing hope (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It also includes the use of indirect efforts to adjust to stress by distancing one, evading the problem or engaging in unrelated activities for the purpose of reducing feelings of stress (Roth & Cohen, 1986).

III. PROBLEM - FOCUSED FORMS OF COPING

Problem - focused coping strategies are similar to strategies used to solve problems. These strategies are often directed at defining the problem, constructing alternative solutions, considering the alternatives in terms of their costs and benefits and then taking actions (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984). Problem focused strategies aim to remove or reduce the causes of stressor rather than its effects. These strategies include mainly taking control of stressful situation by changing the relationship between us and the sources of stress, as well as it includes gathering the information. It means trying to understand the situation and finally a person who is going to use the problem-focus strategy of coping evaluates the different options for dealing with the stressors.

Problem-focused coping strategies will not work in any situation where it is beyond the individual's control to break the stressors. They work best when student can handle the stressors. For example, suppose that a teacher leaves his job at the end of semester without completing syllabus, students may face a great kind of stress. But they can cope with such crisis, which is under their control. Students may encounter examination with self-prepared notes rather than give up the examination of a particular subject. Such forms of coping are called problem-focused strategy. Finally, we can state that, according to long term solution, problem-focused coping is best remedy, as it removes the stressor, so deals with the root cause of the problem.

IV. EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES

Emotion focused coping strategies include avoidance or denial, distancing, minimization of the problem, positive comparison or positive reinterpretation and finding positive values in negative events and acceptance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion - focused strategies mainly focus on changing thoughts and feelings about the stressors. These strategies are used where

the stressors are perceived as extremely threatening and uncontrollable, and when the source of stress is unclear or there is a lack of knowledge about how to solve or tackle the problem.

College students may encounter variety of stressors; sometimes students do not recognize its sources. Consequently, at such phenomenon, they must use the emotional based coping forms. Moreover, though, problem focused coping is best, it is not suitable in every event. For example, when someone has failed at annual examination, problem focused strategy may not be very helpful for this moment. Dealing with the feeling of failure requires emotion-focused coping. It is best strategy for such students who are less able to take control of situation.

Method

Sample: Participants for this study included undergraduate students of various colleges in Sangli district. The sample of 600 students was selected by random sampling techniques. The age range of the student participants was 18 to 22 years. Male and female ratio was 1:1.

V. TOOLS USED IN THE STUDY

Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ):

Revised version of ways of coping questionnaire developed by Susan Folkman and Richard Lazarus was used to assess coping styles. This measure consists of 66 questions. The response format in WCQ is on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = does not apply and/or not used; 3 = used a great deal). The scale has high level of reliability and validity index.

Academic Stress for College Students (ASCS):

This is a self-constructed and developed scale for college and university students. It measures the level of academic stress experienced by students in the whole academic year due to various sources viz. Personal inadequacy, interactions with peers and teachers, fear of examination, inadequate facilities at the college, parents' expectations and socioeconomic status. The scale consists of 66 multiple choice items, like five points Likert-type scale with response options ranging from strongly agree to disagree strongly. A high score on scale denotes extremely high academic stress while a low score shows very low academic stress. The reliability and validity index of this scale are 0.73 and 0.86 respectively.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 The Summary of One-Way ANOVA and Scheffe's Multiple Comparison Test on Academic Stress with Respect to Level of Coping Resources

ANOVA					
Sources of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Signif.
Between Groups	275251.112	2	37625.55	68.55	0.000
Within Groups	1198553.35	597	2007.627		
Total	1473804.46	599			
Post Hoc (Scheffe)					
	N	Mean	Mean	Diff.	Signi.
NOCS	116	245.66	(1)-(2)	48.68	0.01
PFCS	410	196.98	(1)-(3)	68.59	0.01
EFCS	74	177.07	(2)-(3)	19.91	0.01
Total	600				

NOCS: None of Coping Strategies, PFCS: Problem Focused Coping Strategies, EFCS: Emotion Focused Coping Strategies

It could be observed from table 1 that the results of one-way ANOVA revealing significant difference ($F_{(2,597)} = 68.55, p < 0.01$) in the level of academic stress of students those who are using problem focused coping strategies, emotion focused coping strategies and none of coping strategies. This finding leads to rejection of hypothesis, 'There will be no significant difference in the level of academic stress of students in respect of their coping strategies'.

Using Scheffé's post-hoc test, significant differences were found between groups those who are using no coping strategies and problem and emotion focused coping strategies. (mean difference 48.68 and 68.59, $p < 0.01$ respectively). Interesting fact is that those who are using problem focused and emotion focused coping strategies to tackle the academic stress during examination are also significantly different from each other about their stress levels.

The findings of the study have rejected this hypothesis because results showed that those who are using coping strategies have very low level of academic stress compare to those who are not using none of coping strategies. If a student has a capacity or in another words if student has high level of cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual and physical coping resources then he can tackle every kind of daily hassles effectively. Coping strategies is a power available to an individual to handle their stressors effectively. When a student feels that he or she successfully overcomes on their barriers then he or she is likely to experience less stress. High level of coping resources buffer individuals from stress (Robins, et. al., 1993). Students those who have high social support from friends, parents and teachers they may face less stress. Moreover, physical coping resources strengthen an individual to endure the harmful effects of stress. Hence stress and coping has inversely related to each other.

VI. CONCLUSION

Results indicated that coping strategies significantly affect the academic stress level of college students. Scheffe's Post- hoc test revealed that students those who are not using any kind of coping strategies are suffer from academic stress in a vast amount. Moreover, students those who are using emotion focused coping strategies during examination period are better tackle with stress compare to those who are using problem focused strategies.

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