

## Secondary School Learners' Stress Coping Strategies

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**ABSTRACT** Stress can have a significant effect on learners' long-term physical and mental well-being. There are various strategies that learners use to cope with stress. Some of these strategies are adaptive and others are maladaptive. It has been difficult to ascertain the types of stress-coping strategies used by learners in various schools in the Further Education and Training band (FET) in secondary schools. This is a multi-method research in which both quantitative and qualitative research strategies were used to study the stress-coping strategies among FET band learners. The study used a stratified random sampling of 54 Grade 10 to 12 learners whose ages are between 15 and 21 years from eight rural schools in Vhembe District of the Limpopo Province. The questionnaire and interview were used in data generation during the study. Quantitative data were processed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 to generate descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were processed through thematic and narrative methods. Academic related problems were the major stressors among the students. The most frequent coping strategies being used by the learners are both negative and positive coping strategies, adaptive and maladaptive in nature.

### INTRODUCTION

Learner stress has become a major topic of concern worldwide (Centre for Stress Management 2001). In agreement Soliman (2014) claims that stress is a global problem that requires a study that includes physical, psychological and social variables. The learners are also affected as occupational stress affects the quality of educational services, as educators are less task-oriented, deliver less positive reinforcement and are ineffective in managing disciplinary problems which cause distress on to both learners and educators (Wisniewski et al. 1997; Beck et al. 2001; Soliman 2014).

It is also believed that learners can inherit stress from their educators since they are in the same educational environment, teachers teaching and learners learning. Learners develop within systems as argued by Lohman et al. (1998) and their functioning and coping mechanisms may be influenced by their attributes as well as by relationships with their peers and educators. Adolescence is a time that is characterised by change in almost every aspect of life. Physical development in itself is a major change that the learners has to deal with, but these changes are accompanied by new feelings about the self, parents, educators, school and peers. Research done worldwide indicate that learner stress is becoming endemic, which could have serious implications for physical and mental health of learners (Van Wyk 1993). As such stress is inev-

itable, unavoidable and universal part of life that can be contained and be directed through the use of correct coping strategies. Stress may be pleasant or unpleasant and can cause some wear and tear, positives or negatives (Schafer 1992). Seaward (1994) argues that stress serves as a positive motivation and is therefore beneficial. On the contrary too much pressure can be harmful and distressing among school learners. When stress is beyond its optimal point, it does more harm than good. As a result it is important for learners to develop different strategies in order to manage stressful situations.

A number of researches were conducted to identify the prevalence of stress among learners in the teaching and learning environment and its coping styles (Smith 1993; Suliman 2014). World Book Encyclopedia (2009) highlighted the problem of learner's stress as presenting itself throughout the world rapidly. Learners from different schools either in private or public, rural or urban experience stress in their day-to-day lives. Stress puts one's body in a state of high alert also called the fight or flight modes so that individuals are always ready to either battle the problem or flee in a hurry (Drum Magazine 2009). The learners are also affected as occupational stress affects the quality of educational services, as educators are less task-oriented, deliver less positive reinforcement and are ineffective in managing disciplinary problems which cause them distress (Beck et al. 2001; Wisniewski et al. 1997). If there is too little force, nothing will be

achieved, but if there is too much pressure or force something may be damaged, but all these need to be managed through the correct development and implementation of coping strategies to keep the roller coaster on the move every day. If the right amount of pressure is applied, the job is done quickly and efficiently achieved. As such, a certain amount of stress is normal and not always bad because it can push learners on to greater achievements (Brobeck 2007). Exposure to high level of stressful events will alter the chances of successful performance in key social roles in that period especially schooling and will also affect the educational attainments of the learner (Kuncharin and Mohamad 2014; Avison et al. 1994).

Learners suffer from stress just as much as adults do, but since they cannot express their feelings as well, educators sometimes think that learners are just naughty, sensitive and would like to be irresponsible (Smith 1993). Learners feel stress from time to time and experience stress from multiple sources (Kochenderfer 2002). Researchers note that multiple stressors such as peer pressure, tests and examinations interact with one another and can have cumulative effects like being easily distracted, have difficulty following or completing assignments or have trouble concentrating in the classroom (Stansbury et al. 2000). Learners in South Africa are frequently exposed to high levels of violence, bullying and crime in their schools that erode their sense of security and increase their vulnerability to stress (Louw et al. 2007).

Due to high levels of poor parental support and guidance many South African learners are exposed to severe distress (UNICEF 2005). Recent curriculum changes in education were introduced and implemented in a classroom setting causing distress that is to do with academic pressures, demands and obtaining higher grades. As such stress seems to be an inescapable part of going to school. Changes in curriculum, higher expectations and over learning also lead to fierce competition for passing grades with better symbols among adolescents and often result in high levels of distress and anxiety about the future. These incessant stressors all contribute to increased levels of stress, feeling of hopelessness and feeling of severe distress (Bawens et al. 1992).

Such exposure might have negative consequences on learners' social, psychological, phys-

ical and emotional well-being and ultimately lead to risk taking behaviours and maladaptive application of coping strategies. These stressful events may lead to poor problem solving skills and maladaptive coping skills. These rising numbers of learners who are distressed both internationally and South Africa and necessitate the urgent identification of coping mechanisms that may help reduce distressed learners to use the adaptive strategies to deal with their stressors. This study examined the Further Education and Training Band Learners' stress coping strategies.

## METHODOLOGY

Leedy et al. (2010) state that research methodology refers to the general approach the researcher takes in carrying out the research project. To some extent this approach dictates the particular tools the researcher selects. For the purpose of this study, the researchers used the mixed methods in which both qualitative and quantitative approaches were integrated in the collection of data.

### Population

For the purpose of this study population is comprised of both boys and girls from grades ten, eleven and twelve currently in the Further Education and Training band (FET) from eight (8) rural secondary schools from Mvudi Circuit.

### Sample

A sample is a process whereby one selects some of the elements with the intention of finding out something about the population from which they are taken (O'Leary 2004; Lohr 2010). In this study, the sample was eight rural secondary schools drawn from Mvudi circuit with learners currently in FET Band in grades ten (10), eleven (11) and twelve (12) as participants. The researchers used probability stratified random sampling technique to select the sample where each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected. It was stratified random sampling because the researchers considered the learners' gender, grade and age. Each grade was represented by learners organised in strata based on their grade, age and gender.

From each school only six learners' both boys and girls participated in the study. A total of 54 participants were studied. Each grade was

represented by both boys and girls. This means that the study was comprised of eight grade ten girls and eight grade ten boys, eight grade eleven boys and eight grade eleven girls, and eight grade twelve boys and eight grade twelve girls which makes a total sample of forty-eight (54) participants from eight rural secondary schools.

The mean age ranged from 15 years to 21 years. From the same schools, educators from the sampled schools were interviewed to collect qualitative data. The sample was mostly comprised of participants from mostly rural background. English was used as the primary means of communication of this survey even though most of them use Tshivenda as their home language.

**Data Collection Procedure**

Permission was sought from the District Senior Manager and principals of the selected schools. The self - designed questionnaires were handed and distributed to the different respondents for completion. Time frame and the date were set for the collection of completed questionnaires and for the sake of interviews; a date for an interview was sought since it was a face-to-face type of interview in order to gather data through a focus group.

**Data Analysis**

This can be regarded as a presentation about data collected in a more accurate and credible manner, and thereby data is put together in a chronological order (Rubin et al. 2005). In this study, data that was collected by means of self-administered questionnaires was analysed by a computer package SPSS version 21 where in a variety of numeric data using a variety of statistical techniques were used. Qualitative data collected by means of combination structures of focus group interviews schedule, were analysed through categorising of data and parceled into themes.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Figure 1 shows the different stress coping strategies that secondary school learners use.

Figure 1 illustrates the Secondary School learners' stress coping strategies. 68.5 percent of the respondents indicated that they do not seek support from other religion community as compared to 31.5 percent of the respondents who indicated that they need or seek support from other religion. It is surprising that some learn-

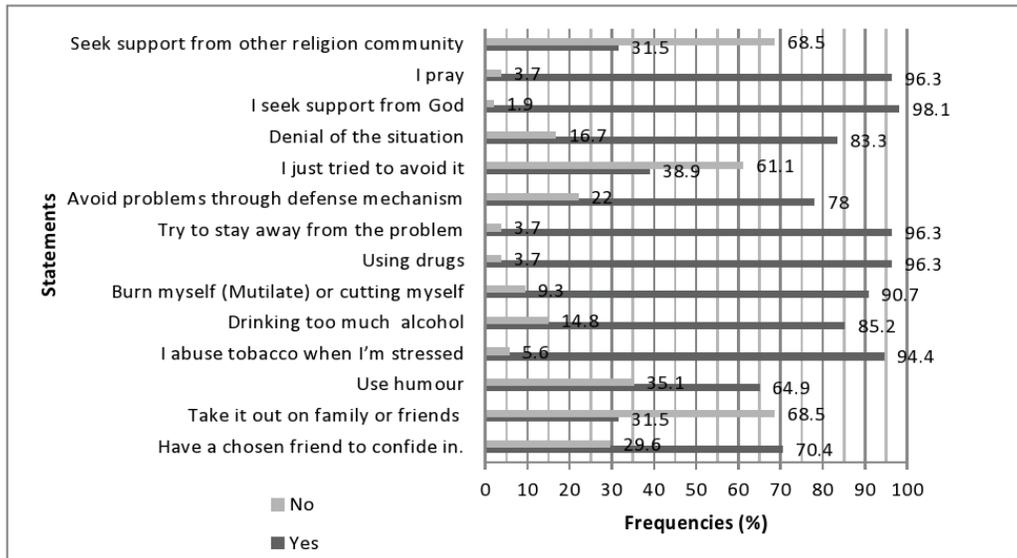


Fig. 1. Learners' stress coping strategies

ers do not seek divine support to cope with stress.

About ninety-six percent of the respondents indicate that they try to cope with stress through praying as compared to 3.7 percent of the respondents indicated that they do not pray to cope with stress. This confirms what Pargament (2002) states that religion is linked with coping aspects; Thomas et al. (2012) added that coping through prayer was viewed as the strongest coping strategy for youth with high personal religious commitment.

About ninety-eight percent of the respondents seek support from God when stressed as compared to 1.9 percent of the respondents who indicated that they do not seek support from God to cope well. These over winding findings confirm what Zhang et al. (1996) indicated that religious coping is more important in an individual's perceived supportive components with God in a spiritual relationship.

About eighty-three percent of the respondents indicated that when they (learners) cannot cope with stress they deny the situation. This implies that when learners are unable to cope with stressful situations, they use defense mechanisms as coping strategies. This was confirmed by Piekarskas' (1991) study who investigated about the relationship between educators and learners where learners use blunting, denial and avoidance to cope with threats imposed upon them by the educators to control their destructive behaviours only 16.7 percent of the respondents do not use defensive avoidance coping as effective coping strategy.

Only 38.9 percent of the respondents indicated that they try to avoid stressful situation, through avoidance. This differs with Piekars' study which indicated that in a relation between educators and learners where educators controlled learners by using threats or bad grades while learners were constantly concentrated on avoiding them. A total of 61.1 percent the respondents indicated that they could not cope with the stressor through the use of avoidance coping strategy.

The majority of the respondents at 78 percent indicated that they use defense mechanisms to cope with stress. This confirms Bacholasiks' study (1991) which indicated that coping behaviours such as avoidance, repression, denials, confrontation with teachers and withdrawal were frequently used by stressed learners as

coping strategies only 22 percent of the respondents indicated that they do not use defense mechanisms as coping strategies.

The majority of the respondents at 96.3 percent try to stay away from the problem as a coping strategy. This confirms the study by Piekarska (1991) who indicated that learners use constructive adaptive coping strategy such as Peer bullying, running away and escape only 3.7 percent of the respondents could not use staying away from the problem as a coping strategy.

The majority of 96.3 percent of the respondents indicated that they abuse drugs as ways of coping. This confirms Anshel (1991), Weinberg et al. (1991) and Bacon et al's. studies (2004) who indicated that learners' athletes are also found to use negative coping strategies like drugs, alcohol and smoking. Only 3.7 percent of the respondents indicated that they do not use drugs as a coping strategy.

The majority of 85.2 percent of the respondents indicated that when stressed, they cope through the use of alcohol. This was confirmed by Johnston (1996) who indicated that alcohol use is rife among high school learners. This study was also supported by Kim et al. (1997) who discovered more frequent use of tobacco and other drugs and alcohols use among heavy drinkers may decides to bunk classes for drinking spree as way of coping.

About ninety-one percent of the respondents indicated that they can burn or mutilate their bodies as a coping strategy. This confirms the study by Woldorf (2005) and Ross et al. (2002) who conducted a survey of 424 high school students in Canada who choose to cut, burn or cause severe tissue damage with intentional self-injury. Only 9.3 percent of the respondents indicated that they do not burn or cut or burn themselves as a coping strategy.

Most (94.4%) of the respondents indicated that they abuse tobacco when stressed. This confirms Schiffmsn's (1993) study which indicates that boys smoked cigarette to cope with stress it is the most accessible substance.

Only 5.6 percent of the respondents do not use tobacco as a coping strategy. Only 64.9 percent of the respondents use humour as a coping strategy while 35.1 percent of the respondents do not use a sense of humour as coping strategies.

Only 68.5 percent of the respondents do not take out their stress on families or friends as

compared to 31.5 percent of the respondents who use taking out to friends as a coping strategy.

The majority of 70.4 percent of the respondents indicated that they have chosen friends to confide in when stressed which only 29.6 percent do not regard having a friend to confide in as a coping strategy.

This implies that when stressed as you have someone to talk to or share the problem with, you feel much better and see stressor as new life challenges that need proper management. This confirms the study conducted by Kuncharin and Mohamad (2014) which confirmed that students rely on social support coping strategy most frequently when they faced with academic problems.

### Qualitative Results

Educators responded to the following questions:

#### *What Coping Strategies Do Secondary School Learners Use to Cope with Stress?*

The majority of participants indicated that learners are aware of stressful situations that require coping means. They indicated that learners use both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. When learners lives are laced with stressful situations they start to think about the coping means that suits the situation.

#### *How Do Learners Cope With Stressful Situations?*

The majority of participants indicated that learners use defensive and varied ways of coping with stress, this was supported by Freud's study (1926) and Grohol (2014) that defense mechanisms are used as coping strategies among learners. They include repression avoidance, denial, reaction formation, sublimation, and vigilant coping. Some participants indicated that some learners get information from educators before using the coping means that they have. Klauer et al. (1995) identified coping means such as seeking information.

Educators showed that some learners may decide to do exercises, listening to music eating balanced meals and trying to identify the stressors. This confirms Dzewaltowskis' (1989) study

of 328 students conducted for exercise behavior which found physical exercises as the most useful strategy that learners use to cope with stressful situations. Holman et al. (1992) found that motivated learners engaged themselves in regular physical exercises due to their enhanced perceived self-efficacy. Some of the participants indicated that learners become active members of the students Christian organisations in schools as a way of coping to buffer against the negatives associated with stress. This seems to be the perceived personally supportive components of an individuals' relationship with God (Maton 1989; Park et al. 1999).

Religion powerfully influences how individuals cope with stress (Pargament 1996/1997). It also explains the unique variance in coping and predicts outcomes beyond secular coping (Pargament 2002). Learners from actively religious families who attend church services, prayed and observed religious practices and were less likely to abuse drugs to cope with their stressor and were more likely to choose drugs-abstinent friends (Hardesty et al. 1995).

It is when learners choose to be members of the SCO and organize their organisations' functions at schools through the approval of the SGB as the juristic person who governs the school and draft its policies. Some of the participants indicated that some learners bully others, fight and steal to cope with their social challenges they face from home. This is evident because Sarafino (2002) defined social support as the perceived caring, help from another person or groups. This was evident when Sarafino et al. (1990), Schwarzer et al. (1989) and Veiel et al. (1992) indicated that social support plays a major role in helping learners to cope well with stressful situations.

Lack of social support, esteem support, emotional support, tangible support, information support and network support may trigger the manifestation of maladaptive-destructive coping strategies like playing truancy, bullying, stealing, and abusing drugs and alcohol or even suicide ideation and suicide completion as coping means.

There are some learners who consider *avoidance* as another kind of coping. In the case of this study, *avoidance* is considered within the framework of *emotion-focused* coping since its conceptualization in this study coincides with the *emotion-focused* strategy of involving in

activities to provide distraction of the stressful situation. Learners use social support coping as a major coping strategy:

- ♦ Spiritual coping was regarded as the most useful strategy to cope with stress.
- ♦ Avoidance defensive coping was used as a coping strategy by learners with low self-esteem.
- ♦ Drugs and substance abuse were also used as strategies to cope with stress prayer was used as coping strategy for Christian believers.

### CONCLUSION

It is interesting to find out that qualitative data substantiated the quantitative findings.

Majority of participants indicated that religious coping was the most used coping strategy by girls. However the most coping strategy used by boys was avoidance defensive and destructive coping strategy such as substance, drug abuse and smoking tobacco or marijuana. It was also concluded that social support coping was mostly used by girls through getting support from educators, peers, family members and parents. The majority of boys seem to use coping strategies like committing suicide, self-harm, self-injury and reckless behavior whereas the minority of boys seek support from religion community through attending religious services. Assuming that statistically and narrative significant results can be used as the basis for worthy conclusions; the researchers conclude that the main findings have to do with gender differences, grade, age and religious affiliation that learners employ to cope with stress.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the recommendations:

- ♦ Parents should encourage learners to make time for fun and relaxation through teaching learners ways to relax. These should include diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, listening to music, reading and drawing.
- ♦ Learners should seek for the assistance of a school counsellor, school psychologist, or school social worker if they are unable to cope on their own or if stress continues to be a concern.

- ♦ School leaders must give learners time to do their school work well. Since school principals are unable to create more time, it is important to use the allotted time well for teaching and learning new strategies that may help them cope with stress.
- ♦ Principals should ensure that learners are aware of their physical and mental health benefits. Support in any format such as counselling or medication should be non-stigmatizing. Other means of coping such as walking, yoga, and meditation should be highlighted in learners' school bulletin.
- ♦ To take direct action in dealing with the stressor (for example in case of illness looking for medical treatment).
- ♦ Learners should be encouraged to seek help through praying and attending religious services such as attending SCO at school and going to church for divine intervention in their lives.
- ♦ Learners should be encouraged to use social support networks to cope well.
- ♦ Learners should be discouraged to abuse drugs and substance and engaging into risky behavior that might ruin their lives and future.

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