

# Coping With Stress: Strategies Adopted by Students at the Winneba Campus of University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

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The purpose of the study was to investigate if students of the Winneba Campus of UEW (University of Education, Winneba), have appropriate strategies to cope with stress. Four hundred students who were selected based on stratified random sampling technique from all the departments at the Winneba Campus of the university were involved in the study. The questionnaire which was adapted to suit the study environment was pre-tested at the University of Cape Coast. The results of the study showed that among the ten strategies used, “active coping” and “positive reinterpretation and growth” were the two most predominant for problem-focused and emotion-focused styles of coping respectively. The study also indicated that students of the Winneba Campus of UEW used more of emotion-focused strategies than problem-focused strategies in managing stress. Among the recommendations is that the Counseling Unit of UEW should strengthen its services by having social support groups that consist of lecturers and students, so that supportive skills, such as talking and sharing, can be developed and students may then become very comfortable to let out their feelings.

*Keywords:* stress, stressors, problem-focused strategy, emotion-focused strategy

## Introduction

People all over the world experience one form of stress or the other irrespective of their race, color and ethnicity, professional or academic background. Anspaugh, Hamrick, and Rosato (2003) shared the view that stress came in several forms and affected people of all ages and walks of life. This implies that stress is a part of life and has many causes to it and that the degree of stress in our lives is greatly dependent on factors, such as the physical health of the individual, the quality of our interpersonal relationships, the number of commitments and responsibilities we shoulder, the degree of others’ dependence on and expectations of us, the amount of support we receive from others and the number of changes of traumatic events we go through in our lives. This means that life itself is stress related depending on the individual’s lifestyle and the level of cultural development. Authors, such as Taylor (1999) and Steptoe (1997) indicated numerous different definitions of stress, used by psychologists, medics, management consultants, among others. In the opinion of Taylor (1999) and Steptoe (1997), stress was made up of many things including a host of related

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experiences, pathways, responses and outcomes caused by a range of different events or circumstances. Taylor (1999) and Steptoe (1997) opined that what complicated this was the fact that intuitively, we all felt that we knew stress since we had all experienced it in life. Thus, different people experience different aspects and identify with different definitions.

One's knowledge and experiences of stress should also expose one to the causes of stress, such as time constraints, workload, health-related problems and financial difficulties which may exert more pressure on the individual than he/she can really cope with. It is in this light that Goldberger and Breznitz (1993) agreed with Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that stress was a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceived that demands exceeded the personal and social resources that the individual was able to mobilize. To them, people feel little stress when they have the time, experience and resources to manage a situation. On the other hand, job demands or workload at workplace may sometimes exert too much pressure than one can bear, leading to physical fatigue and breakdown. Stoppler (n. d.) also emphasized that physical, chemical or emotional factors caused bodily or mental unrest. The physical and chemical factors included trauma, infections, toxins, illnesses and injuries of all kinds. The emotional causes of stress and tension were however, many and varied (Stoppler, n. d.). He indicated that while many people associated the term stress with psychological stress, scientists and physicians used the term to mean any force that impaired the stability and balance of bodily functions.

The study was therefore to investigate how students of the Winneba Campus of UEW (University of Education, Winneba) in the Central Region of Ghana cope with academic related stress and stress generally. Stress, in the opinion of Amran, Hassan, and Say (n. d.), referred to the experience of unpleasant and negative emotion, such as tension, anxiety, frustration, anger and depression. To them, stress involves how individuals evaluate the demands of the situation and balance these demands against their ability to meet them. It is important to find out the efforts of students of the Winneba Campus of UEW, in managing environmental and internal demands as well as the conflicts which exceed their personal resources.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Generally, students at all levels experience some forms of stress depending on their academic workload and environment. Students of UEW, including those at the Winneba campus, frequently complain about heavy academic work load, especially when they have to combine academic and extra-curricular activities. Most of these students are married men and women who travel home to attend to family needs when the least opportunity avails itself. Apart from this, students, especially those who are away from home for the first time, experience a lot of pressure in their effort to adapt to university life and life at Winneba in general. Usually, students show stress induced behaviors in the middle of the semester when academic work coupled with other demands cause them to break down physically and emotionally. Interactions with nurses and the administrative assistant at the UEW clinic indicate that most students who visit the university's clinic complain of headaches and sleeplessness which are symptoms of stress. Such a situation calls for an investigation to identify the coping strategies that students of UEW adopt to manage stressful situations in the academic environment.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following questions:

- (1) What coping strategies do students at the Winneba campus of UEW use in managing stress?

(2) To what extent are the coping strategies of students at the Winneba campus of UEW more problem-focused or emotion-focused?

### **Significance of the Study**

Apart from knowing the stress coping strategies adopted by the students at the Winneba campus of UEW in Ghana, the findings from the study can help the UEW management, administration and counseling unit to recommend the appropriate counseling services for the students. This study will be a source of information for researchers, students and social workers.

### **Limitation of the Study**

The study was mainly focused on investigating the stress coping strategies adopted by students at the Winneba campus of UEW in Ghana. Again, the study was limited to students in levels 100, 200, 300 and 500 since almost all level 400 students were on internship.

### **Literature Review**

Stress, according to Anspaugh et al. (2003), affected the life of everyone. This means that students, teachers, business people, parents, athletes and children, among others, live with stress. In their view, it is a misconception to see stress as an enemy since stress is often neither positive nor negative. They continue that how people deal with or react to stress is what determines its effect on their lives. The way we react to stress therefore seems to be more important than the stress itself. Stressors, in the opinion of Anspaugh et al. (2003) are any physical, psychological, or environmental event or condition that initiates the stress responses. To them, stress which results in positive responses is known as “eustress”, while those which end up with negative responses are termed distress.

#### **Sources, Symptoms and Effects of Stress**

Anspaugh et al. (2003) contended that most stressful situations fall into harm-and-loss situations, threat situations or challenge situations. Instances of harm-and-loss situations are the death of a loved one, loss of personal property, physical assault and injury, and severe loss of self-esteem. Threat situations may be real or perceived and can range from being caught in traffic to being unable to perceive an event. Threatening events dwell on the ability of the individual to deal with day to day activities. Threat stressors result in anger, hostility, frustration or depression. Challenge situations promote either growth or pain, and these stressors mostly involve major life changes which include taking a new job, attending a new school, graduating from college, leaving home and getting married. Challenge situations are usually seen as being good but involve stress, because they disrupt homeostasis and require considerable psychological and physical adjustment.

Stoppler (n. d.) is of the view that manifestation of excess or poorly managed stress can be extremely varied and that, while it has been reported by many people that stress brings about headaches, sleep disturbances, feelings of anxiety or tension, anger or concentration problems, others complain of depression, lack of interest in food, and increased appetite, among others. In severe cases, Stoppler (n. d.) pointed out that individuals experienced loss of interest in normal activities.

According to Riches (1994) as cited in Arikewuyo (2000), the symptoms of stress could be internal or external. Internal symptoms may include experiencing headaches, being moody and feeling sick, while external symptoms may involve throwing things, shaking with rage, and weeping. Riches (1994) opined that it was

possible for many people to experience different levels of stress even under the same conditions. Hansen (1986) also intimated that the symptoms of stress could be behavioral which included feeling of weakness and faintness, snapping at colleagues, not listening to others, doing things hurriedly, losing personal possessions, feeling of being dominated by time, feeling oppressed by imagined peer, academic and administrative demands. The physiological signals of stress outlined by Adegoroye (1995) as cited in Arikewuyo (2000) included high blood pressure, shaky nerves and intolerance to heat, backaches, anxiety and failure in sexual performance.

These symptoms, as indicated by Uguru-Okorie (1997), might show up in abnormal functioning at the workplace which could be seen in constant lateness to work, sloppiness, absenteeism, staff turnover, feeling of not being appreciated, and decrease in quality and levels of productivity. Atindanbila (2006) pointed out that setting very high standards, lack of requisite skills and suppressing workers' assertiveness were some factors that triggered stress. He continued that about 70% of absenteeism and about 90% of mistakes at the workplace were due to stress.

### **Ways of Coping With Stress**

According to Anspaugh et al. (2003), all events in life brought about a reaction, but there were varied ways through which people reacted or responded to them. To them, coping with stress is the attempt to manage or deal with stress. In their view, coping does not necessarily result in success. They comment that successful coping includes becoming aware of incidents and situations that one perceives as being stressful, and recognizing stressors means being aware of how your body responds to stress. To Anspaugh et al. (2003) dealing successfully with stress might require using different types of techniques.

In studying the process of coping with stress, a measure, known as "Ways of Coping" was developed (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Embedded in the "Ways of Coping", according to Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub, (1989), is a distinction between two main styles of coping namely, problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping seeks to solve problems or change the source of stress. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping aims to reduce or manage the emotional distress associated with the situation. Folkman and Lazarus (1980) as cited in Carver et al. (1989) are of the opinion that even though most stressors elicit both types of coping, problem-focused coping tends to predominate when individuals feel that something constructive could be done. Emotion-focused coping tends to predominate when people feel that the stressor must be endured.

Moos (1986) as cited in Carver et al. (1989) pointed out that the interest in the process of coping with stress had grown dramatically. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as cited in Carver et al. (1989) argued that stress was made up of three processes, namely, primary appraisal, which was the process of perceiving a threat to oneself, secondary appraisal which was the process of bringing to mind a potential response to the threat, and coping, which talked about the process of executing that response. In the view of Lazarus and Folkman (1984):

Even though these three processes are easily described as linear sequence, they do not occur in an unbroken stream. Thus, the outcome of one process may bring about a preceding process and that the entire set of processes may repeatedly cycle in a stressful transaction. (p. 267)

Miller (1982) in suggesting ways of coping with stress indicated that relaxation, breathing, refuting illogical or irrational ideas, assertiveness, time management, maintaining good nutrition, exercise, recreational activities and changing usual routines could go a long way to help people manage stressful situations they went through. Ansah (2006) also pointed out that professional counseling should be introduced to reduce stress and

tension which impacted negatively on productivity. In a study conducted by Amran et al. (n. d.), it was found out that B.Ed TESL (teaching English as a second language) Foundation Cohort 3 students preferred emotion-focused style (overall mean of 3.47) of coping with stress to problem-focused style (overall mean of 3.35). Under the problem-focused style, they realized that the strategy most used was accepting responsibility, while the least used was confrontive coping. They concluded that the students coped with stress by acknowledging their roles in the problem. Under the emotion-focused style, Amran et al. (n. d.) found that positive reappraisals strategy was the most used while the least strategy used was escape-avoidance. It was concluded from their study that students managed stress by creating a positive meaning in terms of personal growth and feeling that the stress they went through could change them in a good way.

### **Operational Definitions of Coping Strategies Used in the Study**

Operational definitions of coping strategies used in the study are as follows:

- (1) AC (active coping): Taking steps to try to remove the stressor to improve its effects by initiating direct action, increasing one's efforts and trying to cope in a systematic way;
- (2) P (planning): Thinking about how to cope with a stressor by drawing action strategies, thinking about what steps to take and how best to handle the problem;
- (3) SCA (suppression of competing activities): Suppressing involves competing activities with the view of concentrating more fully on the challenge or threat at hand;
- (4) RC (restraint coping): Waiting until an appropriate opportunity to act presents itself, holding oneself back, and not acting prematurely;
- (5) SSSIR (seeking social support for instrumental reasons): Seeking advice, assistance or information on the problem at hand;
- (6) SSSER (seeking social support for emotional reasons): Getting moral support, sympathy or understanding on a problem at hand;
- (7) PRG (positive reinterpretation and growth): Managing distress emotions, rather than dealing with the stressor per semester;
- (8) A (acceptance): Accepting the reality of a stressful situation;
- (9) D (denial): Refusal to believe that the stressor exists or trying to act as though the stressor is not real;
- (10) MD (mental disengagement): Using alternative activities, such as games, exercises, watching movies and drinking alcohol to take one's mind off a problem.

### **Methodology**

The descriptive survey was adopted for the study. Descriptive survey, according to Fraenkel and Wallen (1993) produced a good number of responses from numerous people at a time, provided a meaningful picture of events and sought to explain people's perception and behaviors on the basis of information obtained at a point in time. To them, descriptive survey designs could be used with greater confidence with regards to particular questions which are of special interest and value to researchers. These reasons informed the choice of the descriptive survey design for the study.

The target population was students at the Winneba Campus of UEW in Ghana. The sample for the study was 400 students selected from a total of 10,980 students from the Winneba campus of UEW (as cited in Vice-Chancellor's Annual Report & Basic Statistics, 2009). The stratified random sampling technique was used in selecting respondents, as it provided equal opportunity for all segments of students to be represented in the

study. This sampling technique was employed because it dealt with population that had subdivisions. In this study, the first set of segments of the population is the departments and the various levels (strata) in the departments were of particular interest to the researchers. At each level, the selection was done based on proportional representation. The researchers obtained the list of students from all the departments. In each department, every student was given a code, which was written on pieces of papers. The papers were put in a bowl and randomly picked. The coded paper selected identified the student to be included in the study. Apart from Psychology and Education Department, which had level 400 students on campus, all level 400 students from other departments were on internship. As a result, the study did not include level 400 students. The sex and levels of the sample for the study are further explained in Table 1.

Table 1

*Distribution of Respondents by Sex and Level*

Level	Male (N = 215)		Female (N = 185)		Total No.	(N = 400) Percentage (%)
	No.	Percentage (%)	No.	Percentage (%)		
Level 100	58	14.5	62	15.5	120	30.0
Level 200	64	16.0	49	12.3	113	28.2
Level 300	61	15.2	64	16.0	125	31.3
Level 500	32	8.0	10	2.5	42	10.5
Total	215	53.7	185	46.3	400	100.0

Note. Source: Fieldwork, 2008.

From Table 1, it is realized that 120 (30.0%) of the respondents were level 100 students and they were made up of 58 (14.5%) males and 62 (15.5%) females. There were also 113 (28.2%) respondents from level 200, comprising 64 (16.0%) males and 49 (12.3%) females. Again, the 125 (31.3%) respondents from level 300 were made up of 61 (15.2%) males and 64 (16.0%) females. At level 500, there were 42 (10.5%) respondents made up of 32 (8.0%) males and 10 (2.5%) females.

The questionnaire used for the study was a five-point Likert scale type adapted from Carver et al. (1989), who conducted a similar research on "Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach". Under the problem-focused strategy, the coping styles used were active coping, planning and suppression of competing activities, restraint coping and seeking social support for instrumental reasons. For the emotion-focused strategy, the coping strategies employed were seeking social support for emotion reasons, positive reinterpretation and growth, acceptance, denial and mental disengagement. Under the various coping styles, the range of responses was from never, seldom, sometimes, often and always, to which respondents were to select any for each item. The designed questionnaire was validated by some lecturers of UEW, Ghana, and UCC (University of Cape Coast), Cape Coast. Comments and observations made by these lecturers were noted and used to improve the questionnaire. To ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of the questionnaire, the instrument was pre-tested at UCC. The reliability co-efficient obtained after analyzing the data from the pre-test was 0.6856 (standardized item alpha), which is mathematically written as  $\alpha = 0.6856$  and falls within the accepted range of 0.5000 and 1.000.

### Data Analysis and Findings

Version 15 of the SPSS (statistical package for social sciences) was used for coding the questionnaires and analysis of the data. Descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations and percentages were employed

to present the data obtained. The regularity of use for each strategy was determined based on the criteria shown in Table 2.

The mean of means scores was also obtained for the emotion-focused and problem-focused styles of coping. Based on the mean of means, the coping style predominantly used by students at the Winneba Campus of UEW was determined.

Analysis of research Question 1: What coping strategies do students at the Winneba Campus of UEW in Ghana use in managing stress?

Table 2

*Criteria to Determine Regularity of Use for Each Coping Strategy*

Mean rating range	Usage/Interpretation
0.0-0.9	Never
1.0-1.9	Seldom
2.0-2.9	Sometimes
3.0-3.9	Often
4.0-5.0	Always

Responses from participants show that active coping strategy recorded the highest mean of 3.75 (standard deviation of 0.96) while the lowest mean of 2.52 (standard deviation of 1.18) was recorded for seeking social support for instrumental reasons strategy as shown in Table 3. It could therefore be inferred from the results that the strategy most used by students for problem-focused style of coping with stress is active coping, followed by restraint coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, while the least used strategy is seeking social support for instrumental reasons. The results also indicate that active coping and restraint coping were two coping strategies often used, while planning, suppression of competing activities and seeking social support for instrumental reasons were sometimes used.

Table 3

*Problem-Focused Style Strategies in Coping With Stress*

Strategy	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
AC	3.75	0.96	Often
RC	3.16	1.11	Often
P	2.96	1.11	Sometimes
SCA	2.62	0.99	Sometimes
SSSIR	2.52	1.18	Sometimes

*Notes.* Source: Fieldwork, 2009 (Mean of means = 3.00, Standard deviation = 1.07).

This is an indication that students at the Winneba Campus of UEW, in coping with stress do not blame others but rather feel that they have caused the problem. Thus, students try to identify the source of stress and take steps to isolate the causes of stress, such as fatigue, and devise means of resolving the problems one after another. However, the standard deviations revealed that active coping and suppression of competing activities had low values of 0.96 and 0.99, which means that the responses were more homogenous and very close to the mean. On the other hand, restraint coping, and planning had standard deviations of 1.11 in each case, while seeking social support for instrumental reasons had a value of 1.18, which showed that the responses for the use of these methods were homogenous and scattered. This implies that the use of restraint coping, planning and seeking social support

for instrumental reasons as stress management strategies was popular with the respondents.

As seen in Table 4, it reveals that positive reinterpretation and growth strategy obtained the highest mean score of 3.88 (standard deviation of 0.96), while the lowest mean score of 2.61 (standard deviation of 1.18) was recorded for seeking social support for emotional reasons. This implies that the strategy which is mostly used by students at the Winneba Campus of UEW for the emotion-focused style of coping with stress is positive reinterpretation and growth, followed by mental disengagement, acceptance, and denial, while the least strategy used is seeking social support for emotional reasons. Furthermore, the results from Table 4 portray that apart from seeking social support for emotional reasons which was sometimes used, all the other strategies under the emotion-focused style of coping with stress were often used, even though they were with varying degrees.

Table 4

*Means of Emotion-Focused Style Strategies in Coping With Stress*

Strategy	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
PRG	3.88	0.98	Often
MD	3.69	1.11	Often
A	3.67	1.06	Often
D	3.60	0.78	Often
SSSER	2.61	1.18	Sometimes

*Notes.* Source: Fieldwork, 2009 (Mean of means = 3.49, Standard deviation = 1.02).

This revelation implies that students mostly manage their stress by looking for something good in the problem at hand, trying to set the stressful situation in a different light to make it seem more positive, drawing some lessons from the stressful experience and trying to grow as a person as a result of the experience. This supports the view of Low (1997) as cited in Amran et al. (n. d.) that students mostly solve their problems by creating a positive meaning in terms of personal growth. To them, instead of facing the stressful situation with a negative attitude, students feel that the problems they face could change them in a good way. The standard deviation indicated that positive reinterpretation and growth (0.98) and denial (0.78) signified that the responses were more homogenous and close to the mean. However, in the case of mental disengagement (1.11), acceptance (1.06) and seeking social support for emotional reasons (1.18) the standard deviations were more than 1 meaning that the responses for the use of these management strategies were homogenous and scattered. The implication is that the use of mental disengagement, acceptance, and seeking social support for moral reasons was common management practices used by respondents.

Analysis of research Question 2: To what extent are the coping strategies of students at the Winneba Campus of UEW more problem-focused or emotion-focused?

In an attempt to know which coping strategies were common among students at the Winneba Campus of UEW, the following findings emerged.

Table 5 shows the overall mean (mean of means) for both the problem-focused and emotion-focused styles. It could be seen that both styles, problem-focused and emotion-focused, were used by students at the Winneba campus of UEW. Students were however more likely to use the emotion-focused style (overall mean score of 3.49 and standard deviation of 1.02) than problem-focused style (overall mean score of 3.00 and standard deviation of 1.07). It is clearly seen from the results that the emotion-focused style of coping with stress is predominantly used by students at the Winneba campus of UEW than the problem-focused style. The



implication is that the students make use of their thoughts or actions to reduce or eliminate the emotional impact of stress as opined by Low (1997) as cited in Amran et al. (n. d.). To them, it is very essential for students to use their thoughts or actions to relieve the emotional impact of stress because if students face unbearable stress, it will not permit clear thinking which may push these students to involve themselves in unhealthy behaviors. In an attempt to know which coping style is more popular among students of Winneba Campus in stress management, it was realized that the standard deviations of both problem-focused and emotion-focused were more than 1, which means that the responses for the use of these coping styles were homogenous and scattered. The implication is that the uses of both coping styles were popular management practices in coping with stress even though emotion-focused style is rated higher than the problem-focused style.

Table 5

*Popular Coping Style Among Students*

Coping style	Mean of means scores	Standard deviation
Problem-focused	3.00	1.07
Emotion-focused	3.49	1.02

Note. Source: Fieldwork, 2009.

### Conclusions and Implications

It could be concluded from the findings that out of the ten strategies used, planning and positive reinterpretation and growth were the two most predominant strategies for problem-focused and emotion-focused coping styles respectively. Again, of the two main coping styles, students at the Winneba Campus of UEW preferred the emotion-focused style in coping with stress to the problem-focused style. The implications that can be drawn from these findings are that the management of UEW should take steps to strengthen the Counseling Centre with the necessary materials and logistics to enable them effectively handle students' problems.

### Recommendations

The findings from the study revealed that students at the Winneba Campus of UEW in Ghana, are more emotion-focused in coping with stress. It is therefore recommended that the Counseling Centre of the university should put in place improved services such as social support groups made up of lecturers, administrators and students. With this, supportive skills like talking and sharing could be developed. This will enable students to feel comfortable and free enough to express their feelings. Even though the Counseling Centre advises individual students who avail themselves for counseling on time management, it is envisaged that workshops, seminars and conferences on "techniques in managing stress" and "time management" for all students will go a long way to equip students with ways of coping with stress.

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