

Chapter 22

Proactive Coping Strategies Among First–Years in Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how first-year students at higher education institutions deal with adjustment issues, with a focus on proactive coping strategies. Students in their first year of university must adjust to a range of constraints, including emotional, cognitive, social, and intellectual commitments, which can create significant stress and feelings of hopelessness given that the transition from school to higher education can be stressful. Coping, a fundamental process necessary for adaptation and survival, shows how individuals recognise, evaluate, respond to, and take away lessons from stressful situations. The emerging directions include development of programmes to help learners prepared for higher education and quickly adapt to their new circumstances. Additionally, the emergence of developmental theories that depict student-adoptable coping mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

Attending University could be an optimistic experience that offers great opportunities for juvenile development (Holdsworth, 2018), as well as the opportunity to define and further their careers and improve the socio-economic status of the country (Nel et al., 2016). Though, for a few of students, this experience would neither be pleasurable nor academically successful (Salami, 2012). The first year of university can be stressful as students adjust to new expectations, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as the many strains of a new social situation (Tinajero et al., 2014). The journey from high school to university for many students is accompanied by a slew of novel and challenging encounters (Mudhovozi, 2012). Students may develop concerns and unfavourable expectations about university life and education as a result of this (Sommer, 2013). According to Sibanyoni and Pillay (2014), first year students have more adjustment problems than students in other academic years, including more hunger disorders, feelings

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of worthlessness, lack of concentration, despair, and suicidal impulses. As a result, the transition from school to higher education can be stressful, significantly impacting students' academic performance (Mudhovozi, 2012). Students in their first year of university must adjust to a variety of pressures, including emotional, cognitive, social, and intellectual obligations, which can cause significant stress and feelings of helplessness (Wangeri et al., 2012). Like most new environments, the first year of university is sometimes a hard adjustment period with unfamiliar expectations, beliefs, and behaviours that can be taxing (Rahat & Ilhan, 2016). Consequently, failing to adjust and adapt to the new educational environment, whether socially or intellectually, may result in failure to complete studies at the school, which is crucial in preparing for employment (van Vuuren, 2014).

Psychological stress shows a poor fit between the person and the environment. Individuals adjust their circumstances or how they are understood to make them appear more favourable, which is known as coping or utilizing a coping mechanism in psychological terminology. Individual qualities or styles, that is, steady personality properties, are emphasised in traditional coping approaches. They emphasise coping as a process in which an individual makes ongoing efforts to deal with challenging or overwhelming responsibilities. Although stable coping strategies exist and are important, coping is highly contextual, and it must alter over time and in different settings to be effective (Holdsworth et al., 2018; Brayn, 2014; Ayele, 2011). Transitioning to university life necessitates students learning to cope with new workload and a different interpersonal setting, both of which place numerous academic, social, and instrumental demands on students (Chia & Low, 2015). Individuals employ a variety of coping mechanisms, each of which is tailored to the situational circumstances (Eisenbarth, 2012). According to Hee Lee et al (2017), multi-ethnic adolescents' daily stress and coping methods are diverse and numerous. Adolescents, according to Murray (2014), use a wide range of coping mechanisms rather than relying on just one or two. Adolescents are also said to use flexible coping strategies on a regular basis, which has been linked to better adolescent adjustment. Coping styles generated by stressful experiences are significant and linked to positive or successful adjustment to a new environment (Sledge, 2012). When confronted with stressful conditions, students may construct their own coping mechanisms, which can be useful or dysfunctional (Thurber & Walton, 2012).

BACKGROUND

The body's natural reaction to demands and changes is stress. Since change is inevitable, everyone will experience stress at some point in their lives. Even though many stressors are transient, those that linger can lead to chronic stress and have long-lasting detrimental consequences on a person (Beer & Lawson, 2017). The way in which stresses are recognised, assessed, and controlled determines how coping mechanisms are categorised. Individuals' coping mechanisms differ greatly, and those that are thought advantageous in some contexts may be viewed negatively in others. Coping is the process of employing behavioural and cognitive strategies to manage challenging or dangerous situations, and it is crucial to preserving one's physical and mental wellbeing (Altbach et al, 2019). Coping strategies is any conscious or unconscious choice that provides comfort or solace in stressful circumstances (Habib, 2016).

After secondary school, students enrol in higher education institutes to continue their education. Some students adapt to this new environment fairly well. Others will experience a significant deal of personal stress and emotional instability as a result of this transformation (Sommer & Dumont, 2011). Van Zyl (2016) list a number of issues related to underprivileged students' poor transition to university

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