

# Coping behavior of students as a means of overcoming stressful situations under martial law

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** The aim is to study the peculiarities of students' coping behavior in stressful situations under martial law.

**Materials and Methods:** During the 2023-2024 academic year, the research was conducted based among 3rd-year students (n = 82) aged 20-22 years, including women (n = 42) and men (n = 40). Research methods: bibliosemantic, diagnostic, system analysis and generalization, statistical. The diagnostic work involved using the following methods: "Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations" and "Strategic Approach to Coping Scale."

**Results:** It has been found that the problem of students being in a stressful situation of war is directly related to their coping behavior. It has been found that female students' indicators of emotion-oriented coping strategies are more pronounced than those of male students (p < 0.05) high level of expression of the following models of behavior to overcome stressful phenomena: search for social support (women – 57.1 %; men – 55.0 %), social contact (women – 54.8 %; men – 52.5 %), precautionary actions (women – 52.4 %; men – 50.0 %).

**Conclusions:** The effectiveness of any coping strategy depends on the current situation in students' lives and their existing personal resources. In stressful situations, students' coping behavior is effective, and the following coping strategies are rational: emotion-oriented, search for social support, and problem-oriented. This confirms students' productive personal standpoint, allowing them to adapt to any stressful situation under martial law.

**KEY WORDS:** coping behavior, students, stress, stressful situations, psychophysical well-being, war

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## INTRODUCTION

The annexation of Ukrainian territory, armed conflict, and war are the most significant negative factors that currently affect the emotional state of young people and cause serious consequences for their psychophysical well-being, including stress, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other conditions [1]. Young people need conscientious supervision to detect symptoms of PTSD promptly and to provide effective psychological assistance [2].

Experts [3, 4] note that stress is the most characteristic mental condition that occurs as a result of extreme life factors, including those provoked by war. This is a nonspecific body reaction that responds to environmental stimuli and prepares the body for active physical action—attack or flight. It is also worth noting that virtually every change in any person's life is a stressor, as it requires some effort to cope with a new situation.

According to scientists [5], regardless of the origin of the stressor (biological or social), it causes nonspecific reactions and is determined by individual personality traits. These reactions can lead to physiological and structural disorders in people (especially young people) if the load is excessive or social conditions do not allow adequate physical activity. Thus, they believe both large and small social and individual difficulties can create stressful situations. Such situations can develop dynamically and significantly impact an individual's psychophysical well-being if they participate in or witness armed conflict and hostilities [6].

The problem of stress in crises is directly related to coping behavior [7]. Coping behavior is a cognitive and behavioral effort a person uses to cope with specific internal or external factors that strain or exceed a person's resources [8]. Hence, it can be argued that such behavior includes the attempts of a particular subject to evade,

mitigate, get used to, or master the consequences of a stressful situation.

Today, the issue of coping behavior is considered in various fields of psychology, for example, within the framework of personality psychology and clinical psychology [9]. Also, cross-cultural and social psychology representatives consider psychological coping when studying the factors that precede and help choose specific coping strategies and analyze the consequences of stress overcoming at the level of individual adaptation [10].

The specificity of current social and political changes leads to other problems that young people have not previously encountered in their lives, and this necessitates the need for them to address new challenges of psychological coping with stressful situations. Therefore, the social situation of development not only actualizes the adaptive potential of each individual but also sets the task of its continuous growth and renewal in uncertain, "difficult," constantly changing situations. According to scientists [11, 12], crises can significantly exceed the adaptive capabilities of any person, resources, and skills they usually use. We are talking about some extraordinary, objectively stressful situations, which currently include the full-scale war against Ukraine unleashed by the Russian Federation.

## AIM

The aim is to study the peculiarities of students' coping behavior in stressful situations under martial law.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

To study the peculiarities of students' coping behavior in stressful situations under martial law, during the academic year 2023-2024, we conducted diagnostic work among 3rd-year students ( $n = 82$ ) aged 20-22 years, including women ( $n = 42$ ) and men ( $n = 40$ ) at the National Academy of Internal Affairs (Kyiv, Ukraine).

To achieve the research aim, a set of interrelated methods was used: bibliosemantic, diagnostic, method of system analysis and generalization, and statistical. The bibliosemantic method was used to conduct an analytical review of scientific sources on the outlined issues. The diagnostic method involved conducting research work with students as representatives of modern youth. For this purpose, valid methods were used: "Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS)" and "Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (SACS)" [13, 14].

The "Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS)" includes a list of reactions to stressful situations to identify a person's prevailing coping strategies. Subjects were asked

to rate 48 reactions from 1 to 5 on a scale. When processing the results, the scores given by the respondents were summarized, taking into account the key for interpreting the research method. It helped to identify the following coping strategies: problem-oriented strategy, emotion-oriented strategy, avoidance strategy, distraction strategy, and social distraction strategy (or search for social support).

The "Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (SACS)" revealed nine models of coping behavior in stressful situations: assertive actions, social contact, social support seeking, precautionary actions, impulsive actions, avoidance, manipulative (indirect) actions, antisocial actions, and aggressive actions. The respondents had to evaluate how they usually act in stressful situations and answer 54 statement questions by choosing one of the proposed options on a five-point scale. After receiving the respondents' answers, the sum of points for each line was calculated according to the "key."

### PROCEDURE

The research was conducted in three stages. The first stage provided an analytical review of the literature on the peculiarities of people's coping behavior in crises and determined diagnostic and methodological tools for conducting an empirical study. In the second stage, the diagnostic work was carried out with the help of the selected tools. Electronic forms with the tasks of the methods were created to conduct the experiment, which contained brief instructions for completing the tasks. The respondents were not provided with keys to interpret the results. The third stage involved processing, systematization, generalization of indicators, and logical and semantic interpretation of the data. The research was organized, and the results were processed by the Department of Legal Psychology of the National Academy of Internal Affairs (NAIA, Kyiv, Ukraine).

### STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The statistical method was used to process the experimental data obtained. The reliability of the difference between the indicators presented in percentages was determined using Pearson's Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) criterion. The significance of the difference was set at  $p < 0.05$ . All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 10.0 software adapted for medical and biological research.

### ETHICS

The research was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Regulations on academic integrity at the National Academy of Internal Affairs. This document

**Table 1.** Coping strategies of students in stressful wartime situations (n = 82), including women (n = 42), men (n = 40); number of people / %

Coping behavior strategies	Frequency of occurrence	Students		Significance of the difference	
		W (n=42)	M (n=40)	$\chi^2$	p
Problem-oriented	frequently	19 / 45.2	20 / 50.0	0.46	>0.05
	sometimes	16 / 38.1	14 / 35.0		
	never	7 / 16.7	6 / 15.0		
Emotion-oriented	frequently	27 / 64.3	23 / 57.5	2.77	<0.05
	sometimes	11 / 26.2	10 / 25.0		
	never	4 / 9.5	7 / 17.5		
Avoidance	frequently	17 / 40.5	13 / 32.5	2.57	<0.05
	sometimes	18 / 42.9	17 / 42.5		
	never	7 / 16.6	10 / 25.0		
Distraction	frequently	14 / 33.3	14 / 35.0	0.42	>0.05
	sometimes	18 / 42.9	18 / 45.0		
	never	10 / 23.8	8 / 20.0		
Social distraction (search for social support)	frequently	23 / 54.8	21 / 52.5	0.54	>0.05
	sometimes	16 / 38.1	15 / 37.5		
	never	3 / 7.1	4 / 10.0		

Legend: W – women, M – men.

**Table 2.** Indicators of students' behavioral patterns in overcoming stress under martial law (n = 82), including women (n = 42), men (n = 40); in %

Coping strategies	Behavioral patterns (actions)	The level of expression of behavioral patterns in students						Significance of the difference	
		Low		Average		High		$\chi^2$	p
		W	M	W	M	W	M		
Active	Assertive actions	9.5	10.0	52.4	55.0	38.1	35.0	0.21	>0.05
Prosocial	Entering into social contact	9.5	12.5	35.7	35.0	54.8	52.5	0.46	>0.05
	Search for social support	7.2	12.5	35.7	32.5	57.1	55.0	1.61	>0.05
Passive direct	Precautionary actions	4.7	7.5	42.9	42.5	52.4	50.0	0.70	>0.05
	Impulsive actions	23.8	22.5	52.4	52.5	23.8	25.0	0.06	>0.05
Passive indirect	Avoidance	57.1	60.0	23.8	22.5	19.1	17.5	0.17	>0.05
	Manipulative actions	47.6	52.5	28.6	27.5	23.8	20.0	0.59	>0.05
Antisocial	Antisocial actions	64.3	62.5	21.4	22.5	14.3	15.0	0.07	>0.05
	Aggressive actions	66,7	65,0	19,0	20,0	14,3	15,0	0.06	>0.05

Legend: W – women, M – men.

was approved by the Academic Council of the National Academy of Internal Affairs (protocol No. 5 of 27.03.2018) and put into effect by order of the rector of the Academy (Order No. 422 of 30.03.2018). Prior consent to participate in the study was obtained from all respondents.

## RESULTS

In the course of the research, we obtained relevant results and outlined specific trends in the behavior of

modern youth. In particular, the coping behavior of young people in stressful war situations is as follows (Table 1).

Evaluation of the results of the "Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS)" showed that emotion-oriented coping (emotion-oriented strategy) prevails among most students (women: frequently – 64.3 %, sometimes – 26.2 %; men: frequently – 57.5 %, sometimes – 25.0 %). This is quite a natural phenomenon, as the stressful situation associated with experiencing acts

of armed aggression by Russia and a full-scale war on the territory of Ukraine provokes high emotional stress in young people. The impact of such potent stressors can cause people to immerse themselves in their feelings, experience substantial emotional distress, and even cause emotional disorders. It has been found that female students' indicators of emotion-oriented coping strategies are more pronounced than those of men, and the difference is significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The state of increased stress often forces a person to seek restoration of habitual mental activity in the immediate social environment (relatives, friends, colleagues, etc.), so it is not surprising that the second place is occupied by the strategy of searching for social support (social distraction) (women: frequently – 54.8 %, sometimes – 38.1 %; men: frequently – 52.5 %, sometimes – 37.5 %). At the same time, no significant difference was found between the indicators of students of different gender groups ( $p > 0.05$ ).

At the same time, coping behavior focused on solving various kinds of problems (problem-oriented strategy) is more often demonstrated by male students (frequently – 50.0 %, sometimes – 35.0 %), compared to female students (frequently – 45.2 %, sometimes – 38.1 %). Such indicators show, first of all, that a significant number of young people strive for rational behavior in stressful situations under martial law. However, there was no significant difference between the scores for this coping strategy in both groups of respondents ( $p > 0.05$ ). The relative prevalence of this strategy among men indicates that they are more resilient in perceiving urgent problems provoked by the war compared to women, who may show some confusion in perceiving complex obstacles and crises. This can also explain the fact that the "avoidance" coping strategy is significantly more often manifested by female students ( $p < 0.05$ ), with a rate of 40.5 %, compared to male students (frequently 32.5 %).

As for the strategy of "distraction," it also takes place in the behavior of students in stressful situations, but it is used less often than the above (women: frequently – 33.3 %, sometimes – 42.9 %; men: frequently – 35.0 %, sometimes – 45.0 %). There is no significant difference in these indicators ( $p > 0.05$ ).

The use of the "Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (SACS)" method allowed us to identify the degree of preference of students for a particular pattern of behavior in stressful situations under war (Table 2).

Thus, in particular, students showed a high level of expression of the following behaviors to overcome stressful phenomena under martial law: search for social support (women – 57.1 %; men – 55.0 %), entering into social contact (women – 54.8 %; men – 52.5 %), precautionary

actions (women – 52.4 %; men – 50.0 %). At the average level of severity, the following behaviors received the most responses: assertive actions (defending one's position: women – 52.4 %; men – 55.0 %), impulsive actions (women – 52.4 %; men – 52.5 %), and again precautionary actions (women – 42.9 %; men – 42.5 %). The following behaviors were observed at a low level of expression: aggressive actions (women – 66.7 %; men – 65.0 %), antisocial actions (women – 64.3 %; men – 62.5 %), and avoidance (women – 57.1 %; men – 60.0 %). As we can see, female students' scores on these behavioral patterns are mostly more pronounced. Still, there is no significant difference between the levels of behavioral patterns in the respondents of both groups ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Thus, the results confirm the focus of wartime students on the external environment, particularly the desire to seek support and assistance from the immediate environment that inspires trust (relatives, friends, colleagues). They also indicate a high level of personal coping resources and skills for actively solving life problems. Also noteworthy are the significant scores on the assertiveness scale, which may indicate students' intentions to express and defend their point of view and their determination in their stated opinions and standpoints. A low level of aggressiveness, tendency to antisocial actions, and avoidance also demonstrate a favorable tendency to control one's behavior to prevent negative consequences and, hence, to overcome stressful situations. In addition, this may indicate a high degree of effectiveness of the respondents' coping behavior and their mature personal standpoint since this is how the ability to adapt to various stressful situations provoked by war and hostilities is manifested.

## DISCUSSION

The war has a significant impact on the psycho-emotional state of people living in the conflict zone and exposed to constant stressful situations. The wartime period is accompanied by numerous psychological problems in ordinary people, which manifest themselves in the form of increased anxiety, tension, stress disorders, and other negative emotional states [1]. These problems can affect people's quality of life, psychological state, and psychophysical well-being in general. Studying the possibilities of overcoming stressful phenomena provoked by war and hostilities is particularly important in this context. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that young people who need proper and timely psychological support because they are at the stage of their personal and life formation (development) are affected by the adverse effects of war and stress [2].

Strong external or internal stimuli (stressors) disrupt the balance of the psychophysical well-being of any individual. The body tries to adapt to the stimulus by arousal. This nonspecific arousal is a stressful state. If the stimulus is not eliminated, stress increases, develops, and causes various specific changes in the body. People try to protect themselves and prevent or suppress stress. However, the body's capabilities are not unlimited and quickly depleted under the influence of a high-stress level, including those caused by war [6, 11]. For this purpose, various methods and practices are becoming relevant, allowing the activation of defense mechanisms that can actively counteract stressful situations. According to scientists [7], the problem of stress in crises is directly related to the coping behavior used by a person to cope with specific internal or external factors that strain or exceed their resources.

Researchers distinguish between active and passive coping behaviors. Active coping behavior is considered as specific actions of an individual to eliminate or reduce the strength of the stressor's impact, to break the connection between stress and the physical or social environment. Passive coping consists of internal ways of coping with stress to reduce emotional stress before the stressful situation changes [15].

Usually, the structure of the coping process in young people is as follows: perception of stress, cognitive assessment, development of coping strategies, and evaluation of the result of actions [16]. All of these components (stages) are aimed at forming the psychological protection that a person needs as a result of exposure to psycho-traumatic situations. Therefore, such behavior can counteract (change) a stressful situation.

Some researchers have concluded that expressing emotions is a reasonably effective way to overcome a stressful situation [17, 18]. The only exception to this is the open manifestation of aggression due to its antisocial orientation. The students we interviewed undoubtedly pay attention to their emotions, but they can somewhat control them. This is manifested in a low level of aggressiveness, as well as avoidance of antisocial behavior (e.g., alcohol and drug abuse, vandalism, committing offenses, etc.).

At the same time, according to the results of psychosomatic research [19], a constant feeling of anxiety and systematic mental tension lead to a violation of a person's psychological well-being. At the same time, emotional interpretation of the situation and self-blame provoke psychological and psychosomatic changes. On the other hand, searching for social support and solving current problems significantly reduces the level of anxiety, irritability, and depression. The results of our research among students confirm this.

According to some authors [10, 13, 20] who have studied the effectiveness of various forms of coping, the least effective for overcoming stress is avoidance, reducing one's capabilities, self-blame, etc. According to the results of our survey of students, such a form of coping behavior as avoidance is present in the mechanism of protection of young people from stressful phenomena. Still, it has a low level of manifestation. Instead, more effective forms of student coping behavior fundamentally influence the crisis to change it (problem-oriented strategy), or at least its constructive interpretation. In general, scientists have mixed opinions about the effectiveness of using coping behaviors for psychological stress management. Some believe certain protective behaviors are maladaptive, as they disrupt a person's adequacy and orientation. At the same time, quite a few researchers suggest that the imaginary reduction of stress in the case of defensive coping allows the individual to focus and mobilize their efforts to overcome crises, including those provoked by war [7, 8, 14, 16, 21-23]. The criteria for the effectiveness of psychological coping are a reduction in neuroticism and vulnerability to stress, the duration of positive effects, and the mental well-being of young people. Psychological defense strategies will be productive in cases where the stressful situation is under the control of the individual.

## CONCLUSIONS

It has been found that coping behavior is a rational tool that helps people control stressful situations under martial law. The effectiveness of any coping strategy depends on the current situation in the life of a young person and their existing personal resources. Stress can become a trigger and lead to functional and psychosomatic diseases in young people.

It has been determined that in stressful situations, students' coping behavior is effective, and the following coping strategies are efficacious: emotion-oriented, search for social support, and problem-oriented. It has been found that female students' indicators of emotion-oriented coping strategies are more pronounced than those of male students, and the difference is significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Male students often demonstrate coping behavior focused on solving various problems (problem-oriented strategy). It has been found that students have a significantly ( $p > 0.05$ ) high level of expression of the following models of behavior to overcome stressful phenomena in war conditions: search for social support (women – 57.1 %; men – 55.0 %), social contact (women – 54.8 %; men – 52.5 %), precautionary actions (women – 52.4 %;

men – 50.0 %). At the same time, the insufficient development of constructive forms of coping behavior causes the pathogenic effect of stressful situations on students.

A high level of manifestation of personal coping resources and skills of active problem-solving has been revealed. The productive personal standpoint of students and proper self-control from aggressive and

antisocial actions ensure the ability to adapt to any stressful situation in wartime.

## PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is planned to investigate the peculiarities of coping behavior of representatives of older age groups, taking into account the stressful situations under martial law.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare no conflict of interest

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