

Stress Management Among University Students in Security and Defence Fields

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to explore the sources of stress among university students and to examine their coping strategies for managing stress. Particular attention is given to identifying which coping mechanisms are most frequently employed and how they relate to students' educational and professional contexts. A quantitative research design was adopted, employing the standardized Brief COPE inventory. The research instrument consisted of 28 closed-ended items measured on a Likert scale and two open-ended qualitative questions. Data collection took place in 2024. The sample included 221 students enrolled at the Faculty of Military Leadership and Faculty of Military Technology, University of Defence in the Czech Republic. Specifically, it comprised 178 military students from the Management and Employment of the Armed Forces program, 26 civilian students from the Security and Defence program, and 17 civilian students from the Technology for Defence and Security program. Findings suggest that students perceive academic demands (e.g., school workload and exams), family-related issues, romantic relationships and breakups, public speaking, unexpected events, time pressure, health concerns, social situations, financial problems, and major life changes as their most significant sources of stress. Analysis of the Brief COPE responses revealed that the most commonly used coping strategies include active coping, humor, planning, acceptance, and positive reframing. In contrast, the least frequently used strategies were religious coping, substance use, behavioral disengagement, denial, and venting. Qualitative responses to open-ended questions highlighted the role of physical activity and sports, social interaction, engagement in hobbies and leisure activities, a rational and problem-solving approach, as well as rest and relaxation as additional strategies for stress management. Overall, problem-focused coping strategies emerged as the most dominant among all categories (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant strategies). Differences in coping preferences between military and civilian students are discussed in detail, reflecting on the influence of military training and context. Finally, the paper proposes steps to integrate stress management education into university curricula, particularly for students preparing for careers as military commanders or crisis managers, where resilience and effective stress coping are essential competencies.

Keywords: Stress, Coping strategies, Brief COPE inventory, University students, Defence

1. Introduction

University life represents a demanding period marked by academic, personal, and social challenges. In addition to coursework, exams, and deadlines, students often face the pressure of becoming independent, managing finances, and adapting to new social environments. These demands can cause high levels of perceived stress, negatively impacting students' psychological well-being, academic performance, and quality of life. Understanding how students cope with stress is crucial for designing effective institutional support systems that promote both academic success and mental health.

Psychological stress is defined as a relationship between an individual and their environment appraised as exceeding personal resources and threatening well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). When individuals perceive external demands as overwhelming, distress arises, triggering a cognitive and emotional appraisal process (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to manage stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These efforts may target the stressor itself or the emotional response to it. Coping is a dynamic, self-regulatory process (González-Cabanach et al., 2018; Gonzalez Casas, Dorado Barbe & Galvez Nieto, 2025), involving a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological components (Balcar, Trnka & Kuška, 2011). The terms coping strategies and coping styles are often used interchangeably (Hatunoğlu, 2020). In psychological and educational research, coping strategies are typically classified as problem-focused or emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping aims to address stressors through active strategies like goal-setting or planning and is linked to lower distress and better outcomes (Gustems-Carnicer & Calderón, 2013; Sagone & De Caroli, 2014; Wang, Ng & Siu, 2023; Zaman & Ali, 2019). Emotion-focused strategies regulate emotional responses. While physical activity or relaxation can be beneficial (Vidas et al., 2021), denial, self-blame, or withdrawal are associated with poorer outcomes (Akbar & Aisyawati, 2021; Rice et al., 2021). Coping strategies are also categorized as behavioral vs. cognitive (Khademian et al., 2021), active vs. passive (Graves et al., 2021), or positive vs. negative (Fedorková, Nekvapilová & Mikulka, 2020). Their selection and effectiveness depend on gender, age, resilience, self-efficacy, and culture. Inadequate coping can lead to

maladaptive behaviors and impaired performance (Okoro, 2018), while active coping is linked to reduced distress (Wolf, Stidham & Ross, 2015). A lack of coping skills can hinder the ability to choose appropriate strategies (Jensen et al., 2016).

This study aims to identify the main stressors among university students in security and defence programs and examine their preferred coping strategies, highlighting the most and least frequently used approaches. Research Questions:

- What are the most common sources of stress among students in security and defence fields?
- Which coping strategies are most and least frequently used by these students?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Student Stressors in Higher Education

Understanding student stressors is fundamental before examining coping strategies. Khademian et al. (2021) classify these stressors into two categories: individual and social. Common academic stressors include high workloads, assignment pressure, academic transitions, poor teaching quality, time constraints, and collaborative assessments (Alsaqri, 2017; Waterhouse & Samra, 2025; Clark et al., 2014; Deasy et al., 2014; Hilliard et al., 2020).

Personal and psychological stressors encompass the desire for high achievement, parental expectations, low self-esteem, loneliness, and fear of failure (Graf, Melton & Gonzalez, 2010; Nivethitha & Rita, 2016; Aan, Ar & Mi, 2009). Social stressors include interpersonal conflicts, adapting to new relationships, and managing faculty-student dynamics (Adams, Meyers & Beidas, 2016; Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). Challenges in life transitions, such as moving away from home, gaining independence, or cultural adjustment—especially for international students—are significant sources of stress (Seyedfatemi, Tafreshi & Hagani, 2007; Majumdar & Ray, 2010; Waterhouse & Samra, 2025).

Economic and practical stressors, including financial difficulties, transportation issues, inadequate sleep, and balancing study-life commitments, further exacerbate student distress (Okoro, 2018; Bamuhair et al., 2015; Aan, Ar & Mi, 2009). The pressure to meet broader personal and professional expectations often results in chronic stress (Ersig, 2019; Deasy et al., 2014).

2.2 Coping Strategies among University Students

Waterhouse and Samra (2025) reviewed 165 studies on student coping in higher education, noting a concentration of research in health-related fields, primarily in Asia and North America. Gaps include insufficient representation of diverse populations, limited longitudinal research, and inadequate examination of students' subjective evaluations of coping strategies' effectiveness.

Students address academic and life stressors using adaptive or maladaptive strategies. Smart et al. (2025) grouped Australian students into four coping profiles: no effective/no coping, problem-focused, emotion-focused, and religion-dominant emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping was associated with lower distress levels, whereas those lacking effective strategies reported the highest levels. These findings underscore the benefits of active coping for student well-being.

Proactive coping strategies are particularly protective. Aloka et al. (2024) highlighted their buffering effects, while Bedoya Cardona (2021) found adaptive coping correlated with better emotional regulation, lower stress, and improved health outcomes among Colombian students. Oyewobi, Oladosu, and Jimoh (2020) demonstrated that coping style influences academic performance; positive coping improves outcomes, whereas maladaptive coping worsens them. Similarly, Anicama et al. (2024) reported problem-focused coping reduces risk behaviors among Peruvian students, whereas emotion-focused coping enhances vulnerability, particularly in males.

Differences in coping arise between student groups. Mushtaq et al. (2024) compared active-duty military and civilian graduate students, revealing distinct stress sources and coping mechanisms. Military students faced greater academic pressure but emphasized technical preparedness and personal responsibility, while civilians dealt more with financial stress, relying on self-care and compassion. This variation illustrates the influence of institutional context and training on coping strategies.

2.3 Coping Strategies in the Czech Context

In the Czech Republic, several studies have examined university students' approaches to stress management. Chýlová and Natovová (2012) examined the coping strategies used by bachelor's students at the Czech University of Life Sciences and compared the results with normative data from the Czech general population. Although students frequently employed positive coping mechanisms, they demonstrated comparatively lower engagement with the most constructive and sustainable methods. Their use of optimal coping tools appeared inconsistent, suggesting gaps in practical coping skills despite theoretical knowledge.

Expanding upon these findings, Chýlová and Natovová (2013) conducted a follow-up study involving a larger sample of 387 students. The results showed that students reported significantly higher levels of self-efficacy but lower life satisfaction compared to the general population. Moreover, higher perceived self-efficacy was strongly associated with the increased use of adaptive coping strategies and a decreased reliance on maladaptive behaviors. These findings suggest that belief in one's ability to manage challenges is a key driver of constructive stress management.

Fedorková, Nekvapilová, and Mikulka (2020) focused on first-year military students at the University of Defence, identifying that the highest stress levels were associated with military obligations and the regimented academic system. Academic assessments – especially those with limited choice of specialization – were also a major stressor. Nevertheless, students reported frequent use of positive coping strategies such as self-instruction, situational control, and response control. These findings are consistent with the structured and disciplined environment of military education, which may foster more goal-oriented and self-regulated coping behaviors.

3. Methodology

A quantitative research design was adopted, utilizing the standardized Brief COPE inventory (Carver, 1997), which enables the assessment of various strategies people use to cope with stress. The authors employed a shortened version of the previously validated and reliable COPE inventory (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989).

The research instrument consists of 28 items, grouped into 14 distinct coping strategies, following the framework proposed by Carver (1997). These strategies are categorized into three broader domains:

- Problem-Focused Coping: Active coping, Use of Informational Support, Planning, Positive Reframing
- Emotion-Focused Coping: Venting, Use of Emotional Support, Humour, Acceptance, Self-Blame, Religion
- Avoidant Coping: Self-Distraction, Denial, Substance Use, Behavioral Disengagement

The quantitative data from the standardized questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics, allowing for the identification of general patterns in students' use of individual coping strategies.

In addition to the standardized items, the authors included one open-ended qualitative question: *"What situations are stressful for you?"* This question aimed to capture students' subjective perceptions of stress sources and allowed for more nuanced responses beyond the structured format. The qualitative data were analyzed using open coding, applying the principles of grounded theory, which enabled the categorization and interpretation of students' responses based on recurring themes emerging from the data.

Data collection was conducted online in 2024 through a questionnaire. A purposive sampling method was applied, targeting a specific population of university students in the field of security and defence. Participation was voluntary and involved an element of self-selection sampling. Prior to data collection, the purpose and aim of the study were clearly communicated to all participants, along with a full assurance of anonymity.

The final sample consisted of 221 students enrolled at the University of Defence in the Czech Republic, specifically from the Faculty of Military Leadership and the Faculty of Military Technology. This included 178 military students from the Management and Employment of the Armed Forces program, 26 civilian students from the Security and Defence program, and 17 civilian students from the Technology for Defence and Security program. The sample comprised 78% men and 22% women, with participants aged between 19 and 25 years. The proportion of military and civilian students in the sample reflects the actual structure of the university, where civilian students form a smaller share of the student population. Therefore, despite the numerical imbalance, the sample is considered adequate and representative of the institution's composition.

4. Results

Responses to the open-ended question “What situations are stressful for you?” were analyzed using open coding based on the principles of grounded theory. The analysis revealed eleven recurring categories of stressors, which are presented in Table 1 along with frequency counts and illustrative quotes. The data illustrate that academic stressors – particularly those related to exams, studying, and deadlines – represent the most prominent challenge for students. Nevertheless, the sources of stress extend well beyond the classroom. Many respondents pointed to emotionally demanding personal experiences, such as family tensions, relationship breakdowns, and health-related concerns. Several categories highlight internal pressures linked to performance expectations, time constraints, and fear of failure. Others reflect discomfort in social or unfamiliar settings, including public speaking, new environments, and unexpected challenges. While financial concerns and life transitions were reported less frequently, they still contribute to the overall stress burden. The variety of stressors suggests that students face a complex interplay of academic, emotional, social, and situational demands. This confirms the need for institutional support systems that go beyond academic assistance and consider the broader context of students’ lives.

Table 1: Categories of Stressful Situations Based on Open Coding of Qualitative Responses

Category	Keywords	N	Example Responses
School and Exams	Exams, tests, credits, exam period, studying, submitting work, academic pressure, school deadlines	121×	“Exam period, tests in general.” “PE credit tests.” “Math exam.”
Family Problems	Death of a close person, illness in the family, arguments in the family, family relationships	68×	“Death of close friends.” “Illness in the family.” “Arguments between parents.”
Relationships and Breakups	Breakup with a partner, arguments with close ones, relationship problems, social relationship stress	56×	“Relationship problems.” “Fights with friends.” “Breakup.”
Public Speaking	Presentations, speaking in front of a large audience, public speaking, communication stress	51×	“Speaking in front of people.” “Public presentation.” “Presenting in front of a group.”
Unexpected Situations	Sudden changes, unknown situations, things done for the first time, new environments	45×	“Sudden negative change.” “Doing something challenging for the first time.”
Work and Performance Pressure	Performance pressure, workload, unmet expectations, failure, poor structure, disorganization	37×	“Workload, urgent unstructured problems.” “Negative behavior from other people.” “Failure in teamwork.”
Time Pressure	Falling behind, lack of time for responsibilities, last-minute submissions, poor time management	35×	“When I can’t finish everything I planned.” “Bad time management.”
Health Problems	Illnesses, injuries, stressful medical visits	34×	“Illness.” “Injury.” “Visiting the doctor.”
Social Interactions	Meeting new people, communication with superiors, negotiation, argumentation	29×	“Communication with superiors.” “Waiting for entrance exam results.”
Financial Problems	Lack of money, difficulties managing finances	15×	“Financial problems.” “Lack of money.” “Less money in my account than my safe amount.”
Life Changes	Moving, new environments, important life events, crowds, competitive settings	13×	“Moving to a new place.” “New important tasks I’ve never done.” “Waiting for something unknown.”

Table 2 presents the average scores, medians, and standard deviations for each coping strategy measured by the Brief COPE inventory. The mean values reflect the overall tendency of students to use specific coping strategies, while medians provide information about the central point of responses. The standard deviations indicate how much the responses varied among students. Among all the strategies, the three most frequently used were *Active Coping*, *Humor*, and *Planning*. In contrast, the least frequently used strategies were *Religion*, *Substance Use*, and *Behavioral Disengagement*.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Coping Strategies Used by University Students

Coping Strategy	Mean	STD	Median
Active coping	3.12	0.722	3
Humor	3.12	0.877	3
Planning	3.06	0.808	3
Acceptance	2.94	0.587	3
Positive Reframing	2.79	0.825	3
Use of Informational Support	2.74	0.929	3
Self-Distraction	2.73	0.885	3
Use of Emotional Support	2.57	0.990	3
Self-Blame	2.54	0.940	3
Venting	2.46	0.968	2
Denial	1.76	0.803	2
Behavioral Disengagement	1.74	0.802	2
Substance Use	1.68	0.930	1
Religion	1.56	0.921	1

Figure 1 complements the descriptive statistics by visualizing the percentage distribution of responses for each coping strategy. The graph reveals that *Active coping*, *Humor*, and *Planning* are not only among the strategies with the highest average scores, but also show a strong tendency toward more frequent use. Specifically, the proportion of students who reported using these strategies either “a medium amount” or “a lot” reached 84 % for *Active coping*, 80 % for *Planning*, and 77 % for *Humor*. *Humor* had the highest share of students selecting “I’ve been doing this a lot” (40 %), while *Acceptance* had the highest share choosing “a medium amount” (75 %), suggesting that *Humor* is used more intensely by a subset of students, whereas *Acceptance* is more moderately but broadly applied.

In contrast, strategies such as *Religion*, *Substance Use*, and *Behavioral disengagement* show the opposite pattern. For example, 68 % of students reported not using religion at all, and 58 % stated the same for substance use. Avoidant strategies such as *Denial* and *Behavioral Disengagement* were also used rarely, with over 40 % of responses in the lowest category. Another notable observation is the strategy *Self-blame*, where responses were relatively evenly distributed across all four categories. This suggests a high degree of variability in how students approach this strategy – some using it frequently, others not at all. Similarly, *Venting* shows a balanced distribution, indicating no clear preference within the group.

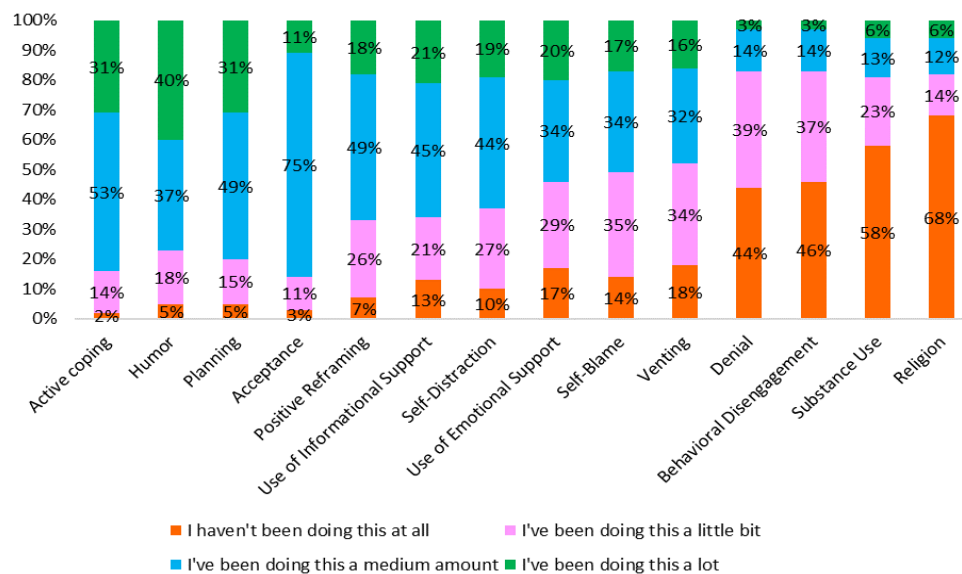


Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of Responses for Individual Coping Strategies

The above evidence suggests that students prioritize adaptive coping strategies over maladaptive ones. To gain deeper insight, coping strategies were grouped into three overarching categories – see Figure 2. The analysis reveals that Problem-Focused coping is clearly the most dominant: 25 % of students reported using these strategies “a lot” and 49 % “a medium amount,” totaling 74 % of respondents who engage in them regularly.

In contrast, Emotion-Focused strategies show a more balanced distribution: 18 % reported using them “a lot,” 37 % “a medium amount,” while 24 % indicated “a little bit,” and 21 % did not use them at all. This suggests a moderate and varied use, likely reflecting individual preferences and emotional coping styles.

Avoidant strategies, often considered less adaptive, were the least utilized overall. Only 8 % of students reported using them “a lot,” while 39 % stated they do not use them at all, and another 32 % selected “a little bit.” This further supports the conclusion that students predominantly favor constructive coping mechanisms, particularly those aimed at actively addressing the source of stress.

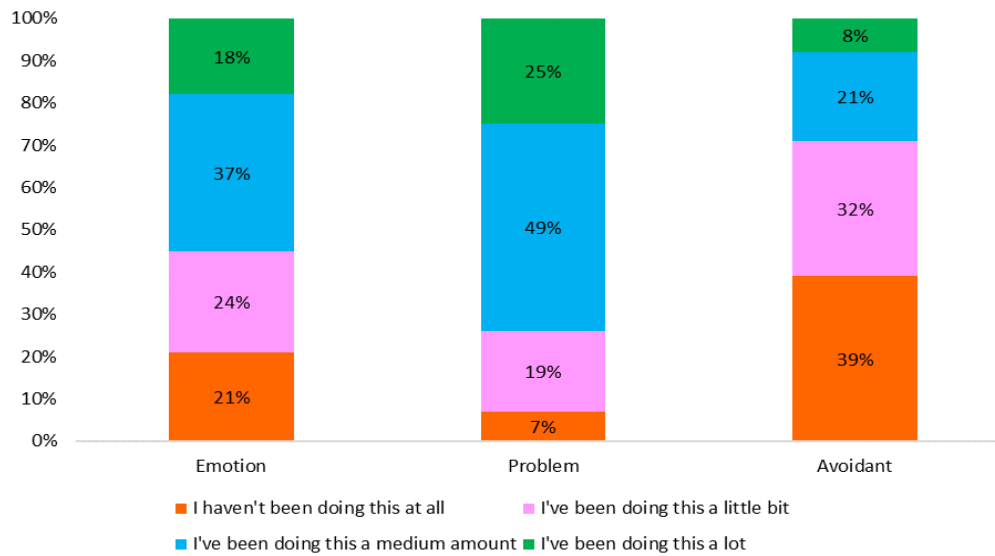


Figure 2: Use of Coping Strategies by Type: Problem-Focused, Emotion-Focused, and Avoidant Strategies

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study addressed two primary research questions: “What are the most common sources of stress among university students in the field of security and defence?” and “Which stress-coping strategies are most and least frequently used by these students?”

Regarding the first research question, the qualitative analysis of students’ open-ended responses revealed a wide range of stressors. The most frequently reported were academic demands such as exams, test performance, assignment deadlines, and time pressure. These findings align with previous studies (e.g., Adams et al., 2016; Aloka et al., 2024; Smart et al., 2025), confirming that academic overload and performance anxiety are among the main stressors for university students across cultural and institutional contexts. However, our study also identified several non-academic sources of stress – family-related issues, relationship difficulties, public speaking, unfamiliar situations, and health problems. This broader range supports the argument by Aan, Ar, and Mi (2009) that student stress must be understood not only in academic terms but also through social, emotional, and situational dimensions.

In response to the second research question, the analysis of Brief COPE data showed that students predominantly used adaptive coping strategies, especially problem-focused ones. Active coping, planning, humor, and acceptance were among the most commonly employed. These results are consistent with Fedorková, Nekvapilová, and Mikulka (2020), who found that first-year military students at the University of Defence relied on constructive approaches like self-instruction and situational control. Similarly, Mushtaq et al. (2024) noted that military students favored structured, task-oriented, and responsibility-driven strategies. Although our sample included both military and civilian students, no substantial differences in coping patterns emerged, which may reflect the University of Defence’s shared institutional culture emphasizing discipline, resilience, and goal orientation across programs.

Emotion-focused strategies such as positive reframing and acceptance were also widely used, suggesting students combine cognitive and emotional techniques to manage stress. However, self-blame and venting varied considerably among individuals, indicating differences in emotional regulation. This observation aligns with Bedoya Cardona (2021), who emphasized the context-dependent nature of emotional coping and its link to subjective well-being. In contrast, avoidant strategies – substance use, denial, and behavioral disengagement – were reported infrequently, reinforcing students' preference for active engagement with stressors. This trend supports the warnings of Anicama et al. (2024) against excessive reliance on avoidant or reactive coping in high-pressure academic settings.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted exclusively of students from the University of Defence, limiting the generalisability of results to other institutional or cultural environments. Second, the research was conducted within the Czech socio-cultural context, which may influence perceptions of acceptable or effective coping mechanisms. Third, although the Brief COPE inventory captures general coping tendencies, it does not provide deeper insight into the contextual or dynamic aspects of coping behavior. Lastly, the study did not explore students' subjective evaluations of coping strategy effectiveness, which limits interpretation of their real-world impact.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into how students preparing for careers in security and defence deal with stress. It shows a strong preference for problem-focused coping, moderate use of emotion-focused strategies, and minimal reliance on avoidant approaches. It also illustrates that student stress is multifaceted, extending beyond academic pressure to include personal and social stressors.

Based on these findings, we recommend that universities – especially those training future crisis leaders and professionals in demanding fields – establish support systems that promote adaptive coping. These might include mental health literacy programs, time management training, and cognitive-behavioral techniques to strengthen self-regulation. In line with Smart et al. (2025), targeted support should also be offered to students who struggle to adopt effective strategies, helping them replace maladaptive responses with more constructive alternatives. Strengthening coping capacity is vital not only for academic success and mental health but also for long-term professional readiness in high-stress domains like security and defence.

Ethic declaration: This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Defence. Participation in the study was fully voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. The data were collected anonymously, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. In accordance with institutional policies, the study did not require formal ethical clearance.

AI declaration: The authors take full responsibility for the content of this manuscript and confirm that no artificial intelligence tools were used in its generation or editing.

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