

## **LIFE STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES OF CHITTAGONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate life stress and coping strategies of Chittagong university students. The sample of the study consisted of 120 university students of whom 60 students were first year (30 male and 30 female) and remaining 60 was masters (30 male and 30 female). Each group again consisted of 15 science students and 15 arts students. They were selected purposively from Chittagong University and some residential areas of Chittagong. The Bengali version of the "Life Stress Questionnaire" (Fahim 2001) and "coping scale" (Huque 2004) were used for investigating the life stress and coping strategies respectively. The obtained data were analyzed by using t-test. Results reveal that the life stress of masters' students were greater than first year students ( $t=2.87$ ,  $df=118$ ,  $p<0.05$ ); the life stress of female students were more compared to the male students ( $t=2.07$ ,  $df=118$ ,  $p<0.05$ ); the problem focused coping strategies of masters' students were more compared to first year students ( $t=9.24$ ,  $df=58$ ,  $p<0.05$ ); whereas the emotion focused coping strategies of first year students were more compared to masters' students; the problem focused coping strategies of male students were more compared to female students ( $t=2.55$ ,  $df=58$ ,  $p<0.05$ ); but there was no significant difference in emotion focused coping strategies between male and female students and also there was no significant difference between science and arts faculties students in life stress and coping strategies.

**Key words:** Stress, coping strategies.

### **INTRODUCTION**

University students are a group, prone to stress due to the transitional nature of college life (Ross *et al.* 1999). Students must adjust to a new academic and social environment, maintain a high level of academic performance and for some, manage their lives away from home for the first time. University education is, therefore, highly stressful, challenging and demanding. An overwhelming burden of information leaves little opportunity to relax, recreate and occasionally leads to serious sleep deprivation (Shaikh *et al.* 2004).

Stress typically describes a negative concept that can have an impact on one's mental and physical well-being, but it is unclear what exactly defines stress and whether or not stress is a cause, an effect, or the process connecting the two. With organisms as complex as

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humans, stress can take on entirely concrete or abstract meanings with highly subjective qualities, satisfying definitions of both cause and effect in ways that can be both tangible and intangible. Stress has been posited as a key mechanism in the etiology and course of both psychological and physical health outcomes. Neufeld (1990) has pointed out that stress is a by-product of poor or inadequate coping responses. Stress and coping are interrelated and dependent on each other. Both types of stress (positive and negative) tax a person's resources and coping skills, though distress typically has the potential to do more damage. Psychological stress has been conceptualized in three ways (Baum 1990). One approach focuses on the environment, describing stress as stimulus. The second approach treats stress as response, focusing on people's reactions to stressors. The third approach describes stress as a process that includes stressors and strains, but adds an important dimension: the relationship between the person and the environment (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce or minimize stressful situation. Coping strategies are defined as the person's constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources (Supe 1998). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguished between broad classes of coping strategies; a. Problem focused coping strategies are any response that is aimed at doing something to alter the source of the stress- removing, defusing or avoiding the threatening event or altering its impact on the person. Problem focused coping strategies are efforts to do something active to alleviate stressful circumstances. b. Emotion-focused coping strategies are any response aimed at reducing or managing the negative feelings that arise in response to the threat or loss. Emotion-focused coping strategies involve efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events. Research indicates that people use both types of strategies to combat most stressful events. (Folkman *et al.* 1987). Carver *et al.* (1989) have proposed 16 dimensions of coping: five dimensions assess conceptually distinct aspects of problem-focused coping (active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, seeking of instrumental social support); five dimensions assess aspects of what might be viewed as emotion-focused coping (seeking of emotional social support, positive reinterpretation, acceptance, denial, turning to religion); and six dimensions assess coping responses that are less useful (focus on and venting of emotions (venting), behavioral disengagement, mental disengagement (self-distraction), humor, substance use, self-blame). These coping strategies if used effectively may buffer the unwanted impacts of stressful situation on physical, emotional and mental wellbeing (Park and Adler 2003). Nelson *et al.* (1995) worked on relationships among daily hassles, optimism and reported physical symptoms. He reported that first year and fifth year students experienced higher stress than students in middle years. They hypothesized that first year students may be experiencing more stress because of the major life transition from high school to university, while fifth year students may have fears about life decisions after graduation.

In a study carried out by Towbes and Cohen (1996), the frequency of chronic stress on the lives of college students was carried out. The study found that items such as

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interpersonal conflicts, self-esteem problems and finance problems which persist for a period of time results in stress. It also showed that the first-year students tend to have more stress than other students. In contrast, Shaikh *et al.* (2004) studied stress and coping strategies in a Pakistani Medical college. They found that more than 90% of the students have been stressed at one time or another during their studies. It also showed that senior students in their final year of studies tend to feel more stressed than others. Laurence *et al.* (2009) conducted a survey of 453 graduate students and reported elevated depressive symptoms. Their study indicated that exams, fear of falling, shortage in clinical time, decrease in self-esteem and prompt reduction in time spent in recreational activity have been associated with higher stress levels. Emotional stress, such as anxiety, students' appraisal of the stressfulness of the role demands and their ability to cope with those demands are also connected to academic stress (Talaie *et al.* 2008).

Ross *et al.* (1999) carried out research to determine the major sources of stress among college students using student Stress Survey consisting of 40 stressful situations. The top five sources of stress reported by students included: change in sleeping habits; vacations/breaks; change in eating habits; increased work load and new responsibilities. A study of Hamaideh (2011) aimed to identify stress and reactions to stress among university students and examine the correlations between student stressors and study variables. The result indicated that the highest group of stressors experienced by students was self imposed stressors followed by pressure. Cognitive responses were found to be the highest responses to stressors experienced by students. Tajularipin *et al.* (2009) worked on the level of stress among students in urban and rural secondary schools in Malaysia. They found that 29% of the students experienced medium stress, and there is a significant difference in the level of stress attributed to gender, and between students in rural and urban secondary schools. The results also indicated that there were many factors whichever influence students' stress such as parenting style and parents education background.

Many studies have revealed a negative association of stress with mental, emotional and physical morbidity. Chronic and excessive stress leads to physical, emotional and mental health problems, reduced self-esteem and affects students' academic achievement, personal and professional development. It is noteworthy that over exposure stress causes physical, emotional and mental health problems (Niemi *et al.* 1999). Therefore, early detection and intervention may prevent and minimize the exert effects of stress on the students in the future (Sherina *et al.* 2003). Gender is another important variable related to how university students deal with stress. Previous research shows that women report higher levels of stress than men (Baum and Grunberg 1991), more often view their stress more negatively than men (Brazelton *et al.* 1996), and are more likely to report their stress as unacceptable (Campbell *et al.* 1992). As well, when types of stressors were investigated, Arthur (1998) found that female students reported greater concerns about managing relationships than did males.

Park and Adler (2003) reported that effective and appropriate coping strategies may buffer the impact of newly encountered stressful situations on mental and physical health. Therefore, using coping strategies effectively and appropriately will help the

students in improving their stress level. Previous research showed that students with an active coping style have lower levels of psychological distress (Stewart *et al.* 1997). People who used problem focused strategies try to deal with the cause of their problem. Emotion-focused strategies involve releasing pent up emotions, distracting one-self, managing hostile feelings, meditating, using systematic relaxation procedures, etc. (Zeidner and Endler 1996). Typically, people use a mixture of all three types of coping and coping skills will usually change over time. All these method can prove useful but some claim that those using problem-focused coping strategies will adjust better to life (Taylor 2006).

Gender differences also exist in the coping strategies used by men and women to deal with stress: men used more avoidance-focused coping than women (Baudier 1997); men used more problem-focused coping and women used more emotion-focused coping (Ptacek *et al.* 1992) and women sought more emotional support than men (Ptacek *et al.* 1994). However, Ptacek *et al.* (1992) suggest that these gender differences in coping behaviour are likely due to differences in gender socialization rather than being due to inherent differences in coping behavior of men and women. They noted that most clients in university counseling centers are women, likely due to the fact that women have higher help-seeking attitudes than men. Chen *et al.* (2012) conducted a study to explain the association between college stress, coping approach and psychological happiness. They got data from 342 students in six different universities. The study has verified that psychological happiness has a negative association with college stress and a positive coping approach. In addition, they found that the male students accounted elevated level of stress, inferior mental well-being, and having fewer proclivities towards using positive coping strategies as compared to female students.

University life is a very crucial time for every student. Transition of students from higher secondary school environment to university environment could cause a psychological, academic and social shock to them, since this educational system has huge differences: the student faces new methods of teaching, new academic requirements, new type of relations between students and faculties and even new relations among students themselves. Therefore, some students who come from different background need to cope with their social, emotional or psychological adjustment. Due to these changes and lack of adjustment students can potentially experience different types of stress, depression, loneliness that can affect their mental and social health, life style, self-esteem, self-confidence, academic achievement, career development. Considering these phenomena, in order to develop interventions for stress, it is crucial to determine their coping strategies. Most of the studies in this area have been done in western culture, but in Bangladesh there are very few studies. The findings of the study would have some applied values and the study would give new knowledge about stress and coping strategies among university students. Therefore, this study will help us to provide such information which is very essential for mental health workers, psychologists, sociologists, governments, NGOs and policy makers to take effective steps to facilitate student's development.

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### *Objectives of the study*

In respect of the rationale of the study, the objectives of the study are:

- a. to see whether stress differ with the academic year of the students,
- b. to know whether stress differ with the gender of the students,
- c. to observe whether stress differ between science and arts students,
- d. to investigate whether coping strategies differ with the academic year of the students,
- e. to know whether coping strategies differ with the gender of the students and
- f. to observe whether coping strategies differ between science and arts students.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

#### *Participants*

A total of 120 university students (first year and masters) were taken from Chittagong University and some residential areas (Hathazary, Oxygen, Andorkella, Bodarhat, New market, Sholosohor) of Chittagong by purposive sampling (non-probability sampling technique). Among the total sample 60 students were first year (30 were of male and 30 were of female) and remaining 60 were masters' students (30 were of male and 30 were of female). Each group was again consisted of 15 science students and 15 arts students. The samples were taken from different sessions and different departments studying in Chittagong University.

#### *Instruments*

In the present research, the following two questionnaires were used

##### **Life Stress Questionnaires**

##### **Coping Scale**

##### **Life Stress Questionnaires**

An adapted Bengali version of Life Stress scale (Fahim 2001) originally developed by (Cohen 1999) was used to measure life stress. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items. The correlation coefficient of the Bengali version of the Life Stress Questionnaire with the English version was found to be 0.90 was significant at 0.01 levels. Test-retest reliabilities over a period of the two weeks were 0.94, which was significant at 0.01 levels. This means that the reliability of the scale was satisfactory. The scoring is easy and simple. For items number 1, 2, 3, 7, 9 and 10 respondents got '0' for never, '1' for almost never, '2' for some items, '3' for fairly often, 4 for very often and for items number 4, 5, 6 and 8 respondents got '4' for never, '3' for almost never, '2' for sometimes, '1' for fairly often, '0' for very often responses. The total scores were obtained by summing. High scores indicate more life stress and lower scores indicate less life stress of the respondent.

##### **Coping scale**

The translated and adapted version of the coping scale (Huque 2004), originally developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1980), was used to measure coping behavior of the respondents. The reliability of the translated version of the coping scale was reported to be

highly significant ( $r = 0.86, < 0.01$ ), and the test-retest reliability of the Bengali version of each of the sub-scales was also reported to be significant. The coping scale is a 22 items self report measure of coping strategies. The scale measures two types of coping strategies; problem focused coping and emotion focused coping. Total items of PFC (Problem Focused Coping) or adaptive coping are 12 and the highest and lowest score for PFC is 48 and 12 respectively. Total items of EFC (Emotion Focused Coping) or non-adaptive coping are 10 and the highest and lowest score for PFC is 40 and 10 respectively. The highest score for EFC or PFC indicates the better emotion focused or problem focused coping strategies of a particular respondent. The measure is a 4-point Likert type scale with 1 (I usually don't do this at all), 2 (I usually do this sometimes), 3 (I do this most of the time) 4 (I do this always). Problem solving (item 1, 12, 16), cognitive restructuring (2, 4), confrontive coping (3,13,17), express emotion (5), social support (6,18, 21, 22), problem avoidance (7), wishful thinking (8), social withdrawal (9,10, 19), self criticism (11), religion (14, 20) and acceptance (15). Generally it requires about 10 to 15 minutes the test to complete.

#### Procedure

For the present study, the main purpose was to collect information about the student's life stress and coping strategies. For this reason, participants were selected purposively from Chittagong University and some residential areas (Hathazary, Oxygen, Andorkella, Bodarhat, New market, Sholosohor). The questionnaires were administered to each of the 120 respondents individually. At the same time, rapport was established through conversation with each of them. The participants were requested to express their actual feelings and thoughts related to their stress and coping strategies. Those who did not understand properly, they were given necessary explanations. But there was no time limit to fill up the questionnaires. On completion of the questionnaires, the respondents was thanked for their co-operation.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the present study, the obtained data were analyzed by using Means and t-test. All statistical analysis was carried out using the statistical program SPSS version 16 for windows.

TABLE 1: MEAN AND SD OF THE LIFE STRESS SCORES OF FIRST YEAR AND MASTERS STUDENTS WITH 't' VALUE.

Group (students)	N	Mean	SD	t
First year	60	20.65	6.48	
Masters	60	23.65	4.86	-2.87*

\* $p < 0.05$

The obtained result in table 1 shows that the mean life stress score of first year students was 20.65 and the standard deviation was 6.48. On the other hand, the mean life stress score of masters' students was 23.65 and the standard deviation was 4.86. That means, life stress is higher among masters students compared to first year students. The t-test

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indicates that there is a significant difference between the life stress levels of first year and masters students ( $t=2.8$ ,  $df=118$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

TABLE 2: MEAN AND SD OF LIFE STRESS SCORES OF MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS WITH 't' VALUE

Group	N	Mean	SD	t
Male	60	21.05	6.93	
Female	60	23.25	4.44	-2.07*

\* $P<0.05$

Findings as shown in Table 2 indicate that the mean score of male students was 21.05 and the standard deviation was 6.93. On the other hand, the mean score of female students was 23.25 and the standard deviation was 4.44. That means, life stress is higher among female students compared to male students. The t-test indicates that there is a significant difference between the life stress levels of male and female students ( $t=2.07$ ,  $df=118$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

TABLE 3: MEAN AND SD OF LIFE STRESS SCORES OF SCIENCE AND ARTS STUDENTS WITH 't' VALUE.

Group	N	Mean	SD	T
Science	60	22.68	5.60	
Arts	60	21.62	6.18	0.99

$P>.05$

Findings as shown in Table 3 indicate that the mean score of science students was 22.68 and the standard deviation was 5.60. On the other hand, the mean score of arts students was 21.62 and the standard deviation was 6.18. The t-test indicates that there is no significant difference between the life stress levels of science and arts students.

TABLE 4: MEAN AND SD OF COPING STRATEGIES SCORES OF FIRST YEAR AND MASTERS STUDENTS WITH 't' VALUE.

Group	First year students		Masters students		t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Problem focused-coping strategies	25.52	5.96	36.85	7.40	-9.24*
Emotion focused-coping strategies	19.53	3.86	14.75	3.62	6.99*

\* $p<0.05$



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The obtained result indicates that the mean score of first year students was 25.52 and the standard deviation was 5.96. The mean score of masters' students was 36.85 and the standard deviation was 7.40. That means, problem focused-coping strategies are higher among masters students compared to first year students. The t-test indicates that there is a significant difference between the problem focused-coping strategies of first year students and masters' students ( $t=9.24, df=58, p<0.05$ ).

On the other hand, mean score of first year students was 19.53 and the standard deviation was 3.86. The mean score of masters' students was 14.75 and the standard deviation was 3.62. That means, emotion focused coping strategies are higher among first year students compared to masters students. The t-test indicates that there is a significant difference between the emotion focused-coping strategies of first year students and masters' students ( $t=6.99, df=58, p<0.05$ ).

Table 5 shows that the mean score of male students was 33.18 and the standard deviation was 9.76. The mean score of female students was 29.18 and the standard deviation was 7.23. That means, problem focused-coping strategies are higher among male students compared to female students. The t-test indicates that there is a significant difference between the problem focused-coping strategies of male and female students ( $t=2.55, df=58, p<0.05$ ). On the other hand, mean score of male students was 17.52 and the standard deviation was 4.19. The mean score of female students was 20.77 and the standard deviation was 4.67. The t-test indicates that there is no significant difference between emotion focused-coping strategies of male and female students.

TABLE 5: MEAN AND SD OF COPING STRATEGIES SCORES OF MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS WITH 't' VALUE.

Group	Male		Female		t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Problem focused-coping strategies	33.18	9.76	29.18	7.23	2.55*
Emotion focused-coping strategies	17.52	4.19	20.77	4.67	0.92*

\* $p<0.05$

Table 6 shows that mean score of science students was 31.92 and the standard deviation was 8.20. The mean score of arts students was 30.45 and the standard deviation was 9.35. The t-test indicates that there is no significant difference between the problem focused-coping strategies of science and arts students. On the other hand, mean score of science students was 17.45 and the standard deviation was 4.53. The mean score of arts students was 16.83 and the standard deviation was 4.36. The t-test indicates that there is no significant difference between the emotion focused-coping strategies of science and arts students.

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TABLE 6: MEAN AND SD OF COPING STRATEGIES SCORES OF SCIENCE AND ARTS STUDENTS WITH 't' VALUE.

Group	Science		Arts		t
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Problem focused-coping strategies	31.92	8.20	30.45	9.35	0.91
Emotion focused-coping strategies	17.45	4.53	16.83	4.36	0.76

P>0.05

The present study has focused on exploring life stress and coping strategies among university students as a psychological phenomenon in comparison to certain socio demographic factors like academic year (first year and masters'), gender (male and female) and group (science and arts) of students. The first objective of the study was to see whether stress differ with the academic year of the students. Results indicate that, masters' students suffer from more life stress compared to first year students. Student life is exciting but it can also be very pressured and stressful as it is a transitional period. It also involves many challenges at a practical level. When students get admission in a university and reside in a hall/new place, then lead stressful life but the duration and severity of their stress is very short. Because that time they have many friends and enjoy new experiences. So, he recovers from stress quickly and leads very joyful life. After completing honors and admitting in masters every student deals with many stressors that how to manage a good job, make a good result, support family member, bear own living expense, life partner etc. This matter creates more stressful situation to masters' student than first year students (Shaikh *et al.* 2004). If stress is not dealt with effectively, feelings of loneliness and nervousness, as well as sleeping and excessive worrying may result (Wright 1967).

The second objective of the present study was to know whether stress differ with the gender of the students. Results indicate that, female students suffer from more stress than male students. Female and male students have seemingly different experiences when coping with stress. Interpersonal stress seems to be more acute for female. Male experience less stress than female does regarding their self-esteem, self-image and health. Society expects different behaviour from boys and girls. The girls are supposed to be submissive, well mannered, docile, while the boys are supposed to be aggressive and independent. For this reason, girls don't express their emotion and it leads to the emotional problem than boys, including symptoms of stress, depression and anxiety (Baum and Grunberg 1991). Moreover, sometimes girls may be faced unexpected problems by male students such as, eve teasing. It can lead to the more stress and in severe cases can cause suicide (Ali 2006). Female and male students remain in romantic and emotional mood. Sometime they are engaged in romantic relation. But females suffer more stress than boys in respect to maintain relationship. It has a negative effect on academic performance (Hatcher and Prus 1991). Sometimes this relationship may cause unexpected pregnancy (Roberts *et al.* 2005).

The third objective of the present study was to observe whether stress differ between science and arts students. The social perspective of Bangladesh is not developed like developing countries. In Bangladesh, most of the students complete their honors' or masters degree and then move to pursue a better job which may be government, non-government or private sector. Here need not to specify subject where he conducts job. Most of the students in different disciplines do better job in different sectors. So, group is not major factor. Now to get a good job is becoming very difficult task. So, it creates stress in both science and arts students (Nelson *et al.* 1995). Therefore, political issues are very severe among university campus especially in hall. Sometimes it may cause stress among students. So, the present study found that there was no significant difference between the stress levels of arts and science students.

The fourth objective of the present study was to investigate whether coping strategies differ with the academic year of the students. Masters' students have better problem focused coping strategies than first year students. First year students use more emotional focused coping strategies compared to Masters' students. The students of first year have limited experience about their university residential life. Because, they have recently come from different colleges and started university life. They cannot get enough opportunity to learn to cope with problems realistically and show more emotional focused coping strategies as response to stressors. But masters' students have more experience about their personal, social or academic life than first year students. They are capable of facing many challenging situation in campus life. They can take direct action to alter the situation to reduce the amount of stress. So, their problem focused coping strategies are higher than first year students.

The fifth objective of the present study was to know whether coping strategies differ with gender of the students. Male students show more problem focused coping strategies than female students. Female students show more emotion focused coping strategies than male students. These gender differences in coping behaviour are likely due to differences in gender socialization rather than being due to inherent differences in coping behaviour of men and women. Our social expectations are different for male and female. Females are relatively passive and sensitive according to gender stereotype and shows emotional responses to stressors. Our society does not encourage them to defense effectively for stress relief. Ptacek *et al.* (1994) investigated gender differences in coping with stress. They found females to be more emotion focused coping strategies than male.

The sixth objective of the present study was to observe whether coping strategies differ between science and arts students. Result indicates that there was no significant difference between science and arts students according to coping strategies. Because, their department or subject of study cannot create differences in their cognition, effort, skill and behavior to cope with stressors.

This study has some limitations which are; a. the sample size was relatively small which is not sufficient to make valid generalization about stress and coping strategies among university students. b. The study was administered to some specific hall of

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Chittagong University and specific areas of Chittagong. This study may have important implications for psychologist, social worker, organizations working with stressful and depressed university students. The findings from these types of research will definitely help us to understand the reasons, causes and consequences of stress and coping strategies among university students in Bangladesh and thus will contribute to reduce the stress of university students. Finally, it is worthwhile to suggest further in depth research with a large sample in this area so as to find out more variables revealing other factors related to stress and coping strategies among university students. This study may also have important recommendations, a majority asks for a more encouraging, interactive and friendly relationship between faculty and students. The need for more effective student advisors, peer education and counseling was clearly highlighted in every hall in university. Different stress management techniques such as meditation, support groups, games etc. help in better adoption of coping skills, improved knowledge of stress and enhanced ability to resolve conflicts. Ensure better hostel facilities for the university students. They want more entertainment activities such as movie shows, reading clubs, dramatics and debates, musical and cultural events, sports, free internet facilities and more college-sponsored excursion tours. Social system must be changed and take an immediate step so that female student can take part any activity like male. Government should ensure job for specific subject and enhance fund for ensuring higher education.

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