



An Exploration of Students' Experiences of Coping with Stress to Promote Well-Being: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the phenomenologically meaningful ways in which students support their well-being through the development of coping strategies. Additionally, how the exploration of these methods may have led to a richer understanding of the ways in which they have enhanced their well-being with regards to stress resilience and pressures associated with life as an undergraduate. An opportunity sample of six undergraduate students, in an equal proportion of genders, participated in semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used, as it revolves around context, meaning and perspectives. Three superordinate themes emerged through the analytic process, which were explored with regards to existing research: (1) Positive Coping Techniques, (2) Maladaptive Coping Techniques, and (3) The Relationship Between Stress and Well-Being. This research concluded that individuals must discover the methods of coping most suited to them individually, and successfully employ them in stressful situations in order to maintain a high level of both psychological and physical well-being.

KEY WORDS:	STUDENTS	STRESS	COPING	WELL-BEING	IPA
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Introduction

Student Stress and Coping

Stress can have adverse effects on an individual's health and ability to function (Deasy et al., 2014). It is a widely researched phenomenon amongst university students, as they report increased levels of psychological distress (Stallman, 2010), and have various environmental stressors to balance alongside academic demand (Chow and Flynn, 2016). A stressful situation has potential to obstruct one's physical or psychological well-being, and is perceived by the individual as threatening or destructive (Vaughn, 2003). Hurst et al. (2013) reviewed forty qualitative studies; concluding that relationships, lack of resources, expectations, academics, environment, diversity and transitions were the main causes of stress amongst university students. Experiencing high levels of stress can have negative implications for both one's mental health (Hammen, 2005; Kendler et al., 2003) and physical health (Ellard et al., 2005, Faulkner and Smith, 2009). With this taken into consideration, it is of great importance to discover the most effective methods to combat these stressors.

The thoughts and behaviours an individual has and employs in stressful situations refers to how they cope with stress (Minzi and Sacchi, 2001). Seminal work on stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) describes coping strategies as cognitive and behavioural responses to stressful stimuli, specifically defining two categories for coping: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. An individual adopting a problem-focused coping approach would take logical actions to target the stressor at the cause, aiming to directly reduce the stress. Conversely, an individual using an emotion-focused coping approach would attempt to change their emotional reaction to the stressor to alleviate the stress. This is a simplistic explanation for coping techniques, as it does not explore the specific thoughts and behaviours that occur in coping with stress, more emphasis is needed on specific coping methods to make it a fully flourished explanation of stress management. Coping strategies are unique to each person, therefore the successful ways of managing stress must be tailored individually to maintain a positive well-being.

Positive Coping Techniques

Positive coping mechanisms that have been found to provide recovery and relief from stress include the works of Ragsdale et al. (2011) who found that engaging in hobbies and recreational activities at the weekend reduced the negative effects of stress amongst students. By engaging in hobbies and leisurely activities, it allows students to have an escape from the academic demands of university, which are perceived as highly stressful (Stallman and Hurst, 2016). Additionally, low-effort activities that have little strains on an individual may be useful in the reduction of stress and lead to higher levels of well-being (Sonnentag, 2001). Student stress is usually a product of work load and a chaotic schedule (Afsar and Kulsoom, 2015), therefore low-effort, enjoyable activities may provide some relief from the usual exertion of stressful tasks.

Lemaire and Wallace (2010) found exercising and social support as two of the most frequently used coping strategies. Exercise may lead to a reduction in tension, or a resilience towards stress (Salmon, 2001), and social support has been found to reduce feelings of stress and enhance subjective well-being (Thoits, 1995), making

them both valuable methods of coping with stress. Social support can be accessed in many different ways, for example speaking to friends or family, or through university support platforms. Baqutayan and Mai (2012) suggest that academic counselling is a useful tool in helping to diminish student stress. However, people may be less willing to seek this type of social support due to self-stigma (Vogel et al., 2007), abolition of these attitudes is necessary in order for people to feel confident in accessing these support platforms to cope with stress. Jain et al. (2007) found that mindfulness meditation is effective in reducing stress amongst students, minimising distraction and enhancing a positive state of mind. Due to the adaptive nature of these coping mechanisms, it may be useful for students to be taught and recommended these techniques to promote well-being.

Maladaptive Coping Techniques

Maladaptive coping techniques, which equally may provide relief from stress, however, tend to bear social stigma or have negative effects for one's health include socialising and partying, which are important parts of life for many students. Students often use social relations as a source of minimising stress (Macgeorge et al., 2005). Young people's social events often involve alcohol use or illicit drug consumption (Lindsay, 2003), and alcohol consumption is a common coping mechanism for students (Rice and Van Arsdale, 2010). Hussong (2003) found that it is a particularly prominent form of stress management when dealing with controllable stressors, for example, the stress a student may feel when working close to a deadline. Although using alcohol may provide relief from stress, excessive alcohol consumption is damaging for one's health (Lam and Chim, 2010). This therefore would be considered a maladaptive coping mechanism as it lessens individuals' physical well-being.

Bottorff et al. (2009) found that some young adults use cannabis as a form of stress relief. However, as this act is not permitted by law, users have potential to face stigma attached to this method of coping (Hathaway et al., 2011). This may be damaging to an individual, leaving them feeling undervalued and misconstrued. Many researchers have found an association between tobacco smoking and stress (Ashare et al., 2011; Carters and Byrne, 2013; Lawless et al., 2015; Lindström et al., 2013). Smoking has many health risks, and is also linked to early mortality (Carbone et al., 2005). Despite this, there are still psychological benefits of tobacco use for smokers when they are stressed, Nichter et al. (2007) found that students use smoking to take a break and then refocus, and also reported a perceived need for smoking under exam stress.

Some students attempt to avoid the cause of the stress as a means to cope with it (Lo, 2002). In doing this, students are not dealing with the problem that is producing stress, therefore it would be considered a maladaptive coping strategy. Avoidance of stress may provide temporary relief from its negative consequences, however it will not actively reduce stress (Kirkland, 1998).

Although these coping mechanisms are maladaptive, in that they carry social stigma and may have negative implications for one's health, they may still assist in the reduction of stress for students utilising them; therefore, cannot be seen as completely negative.

Motivation, Coping and Well-Being

Motivation is an important factor in relation to coping with stress, individuals who actively cope with stress are likely to feel more relief from its negative effects (Shields, 2001). Motivation positively correlates with students' course grades, and individuals who do not receive their desired grade experience greater academic stress (Struthers et al., 2000). Thus, students who are motivated and actively cope with stress are more likely to academically achieve and be protected from the undesirable consequences of stress. An individual's choice of coping strategies directly effects their well-being. If an individual does not employ successful coping strategies, this subsequently may have negative implications for their well-being. Conversely, an individual's high or low level of psychological well-being may influence their choice of coping strategies.

Chýlová (2013) described well-being as a combination of an individual's condition of health and satisfaction with life. Those with higher psychological well-being adopt adaptive coping mechanisms such as being committed, and those with lower psychological well-being use maladaptive strategies such as ignoring the problem (Gustems-Carnicer and Calderón, 2012). Diener and Chan (2011) suggest that high levels of subjective well-being, including optimism, satisfaction with life and upbeat emotions will result in improved health and a longer life. As stress is predominantly associated with negative emotions, it may have an undesirable effect on an individual's psychological well-being, and consequently their health.

Stress can have negative implications for both physical and psychological health. Stress outside of an individual's control during adolescence can provoke undesirable feelings such as hopelessness, insignificance and lack of control; these emotions have a tendency to lead to maladaptive coping strategies (Landis et al., 2007). Additionally, emotions can alter bodily processes, Kiecolt-Glaser et al. (2002) found negative feelings such as stress may delay bodily responses such as wound healing. It has been discovered that heightened stress and lack of control over one's stressors can lead to sleeping problems (Morin et al., 2003), this negatively impacts upon well-being as lack of sleep has negative consequences on health (Burt et al., 2014; Perfect et al., 2010). However, it is possible that stress will not always elicit negative emotions, there may be some benefits to being stressed, such as motivating an individual to meet a deadline, complete daily tasks or strive toward future goals (Saleh, 2009; cited in Persaud and Persaud, 2015). Channeling negative emotions toward stress could lead to a reduction in its negative effects, and promote a healthier well-being.

The Present Study

The present study aimed to explore the phenomenologically meaningful ways in which students support their well-being through the development of coping strategies. Additionally, how the exploration of these methods have led to a richer understanding of the ways in which they have enhanced their well-being with regards to stress resilience and pressures associated with life as an undergraduate. Furthermore, it could assist higher education facilitators to coach current students about the most successful techniques in combating stress. This study will build on previous research by focusing on a general population of students attending university in England. Throughout the reviewed literature, stress, coping mechanisms and well-being have not been explored as an interrelating triad in this

setting. The majority of past research has either taken place outside of the United Kingdom or focuses on specific cohorts of students, particularly those on vocational courses; the current research will centre on a wider range of students.

Methodology

Design

The aim of this study was to explore students' experiences of coping with stress, and how they support their well-being through the development of these coping strategies. This was achieved through the conduction of semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researcher to unearth in-depth data about individual experience (Potter and Hepburn 2005). This method is applicable to coping with stress, as individual's cope in unique ways, dependent on personality and perceived difficulty and pressure of the task (Matthews and Campbell, 1998). Due to the largely quantitative nature of research in this field, this study aimed to provide new insight into stress-coping to promote well-being amongst students. Quantitative approaches objectively test variables (Koskey and Stewart, 2014), and in this case, ignore the complexity of emotions that may be faced by individuals' experiencing stress, highlighting the importance of qualitative research in this area.

Participants

As recommended for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) by Smith and Osborn (2008), a small sample size of six participants was used in order to gather rich, complex and meaningful data (Smith et al., 2009), this was obtained through opportunity sampling. There were meaningful points of similarity and difference between the participants (Smith et al., 2009), as they were all undergraduate students, studying at university in England, yet there were no restrictions for gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity as these factors were irrelevant to the research aims. The participants' ages ranged from 20-22, and there was an equal number of male and female participants, which enabled a fair representation of stress-coping to promote well-being for both genders.

The researcher had an existing relationship with the participants, benefitting the research as there was already a rapport in place, which made participants more comfortable to discuss sensitive topics. Schafer and Navarro (2003) have proposed that it is difficult for individuals to discuss personal or sensitive matter without rapport. Additionally, selecting participants from the researcher's own social circle can assist with engagement and interest in the participants' personal stories (Salmons, 2010). However, there are ethical implications for interviewing people known to the researcher, which have been discussed elsewhere in this report.

Students have been selected for this research as they are influenced by many different forms of stress, including academic, personal, health and environmental stressors (Dusselier et al., 2005). Additionally, the emotions associated with stress can have adverse effects on students' academic success (Saklofske et al., 2012). Therefore, the most successful coping mechanisms must be established in order to enhance students' well-being. Focusing on a specific group of people in a particular context, in this case, students attending university in the United Kingdom, fits with the idiographic nature of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). A general population of students

was selected for this sample, as a lot of research conducted in this area has been with specific cohorts of students, particularly those on vocational courses.

Data Collection

The data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews, to explore the individual, personal experiences of the participants (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Prior to commencement of the interviews, twelve potential participants were given an invitation letter (Appendix One), in order to ensure the researcher reached her desired target of six participants. The first six participants to respond were interviewed. A quiet, secure place for the interview to be conducted was agreed between the participant and the researcher before the interview took place. Before beginning the interview, the participants were given an information sheet (Appendix Two) and a consent form (Appendix Three) to sign. Each interview was recorded using a digital recording device, and all recordings were stored on an encrypted computer, then destroyed after the transcription process.

The interview schedule (Appendix Four) explored how students typically cope in stressful situations and actions they have taken to deal with stressful events in the past, with reference to the effects this has had on their mental and physical well-being. It further explored how participants perceived their methods of coping, and feelings associated with coping with past stressful events. The researcher implicated a funnelling technique for these questions, which gave participants the freedom to offer their personal views, before funnelling them towards the more specific aims of the study (Smith and Osborn, 2008). To keep with the inductive nature of IPA (Smith, 2004), the questions focused on personal experiences of stress-coping, from which general assumptions could be made. Each interview lasted from thirty minutes to an hour, ensuring the data would be rich, intricate and deep for the analysis.

Data Analysis

IPA was used for the data analysis, this was chosen as Smith and Osborn (2008) proposed that semi-structured interviews and IPA work desirably well together. The epistemology of IPA focuses on an in-depth consideration of individual cases (Smith et al., 2009). As this study was concerned with individual's personal experiences of stress-coping, IPA was the obvious choice of analysis due to its phenomenological nature. Phenomenology is concerned with how an individual perceives their world, both personally, and as an interactive relationship with the world and others (Smith et al., 2009). This bears relevance to stress-coping, as it is a unique process, but also concerns one's relationship with the world around them, and subsequently their well-being. In order for the researcher to get access to the participants' perceptions of coping with stress, IPA revolves heavily around interpretations. A double hermeneutic was applied in analysis, as the participants are understanding and explaining their world, and the researcher attempting to interpret this explanation with her own conceptions (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

Before beginning the analysis, the researcher transcribed all of the interviews (Appendix Five). The process of analysis was an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith, 2007), it involved the researcher reading and re-reading the transcripts, followed by a close line-by-line analysis. This enabled the researcher to understand each participant's methods of stress-coping and the implications on their subjective well-being, leading to the identification of emergent themes in each transcript. The active

role of the researcher became important at this stage (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014), as it was necessary to make sense of the data, and its interaction with psychological underpinnings of reasons why the participants may have acted or coped in a certain way in response to stress. This led to a more interpretative analysis (Smith et al., 2009). A structured table was created for each participant (Appendix Six), which included emerging themes, original codes from the transcript, quotes, and comments from the researcher. This highlighted the overarching themes between the transcripts, and allowed data to be traced throughout the analytical process (Smith et al., 2009).

Ethical Considerations

The research conducted has followed the British Psychological Society's code of ethics and conduct, and has been approved within these guidelines by the MMU Psychology department, using the Application for Ethical Approval form (Appendix Seven).

It was ensured that participants could give full informed consent before participating in the research by providing them with an information sheet, this contained a description of the interview process, and explained their rights as a participant. Additionally, they were given a consent form to sign, demonstrating their understanding of the procedure and agreement to take part. Direct quotes have been used in this report, meaning complete confidentiality was impossible. However, each participant was given a pseudonym, ensuring that their identities were anonymous. Additionally, any data such as the name of a family member or a geographical location, which could be used to identify a participant have been changed during the transcription process. Due to the existing relationship between the researcher and participants, there is a potential for undue influence by the researcher. This was resolved through distribution of invitation letters, which included the researcher's contact details, so it was the participants autonomous choice to partake in the study.

The participants were made aware of their right to withdraw their data at any time for up to ten days after the study had taken place, without giving a reason for doing so. After the interview, participants were given a debrief form (Appendix Eight), which revealed the aims of the study and gave opportunity for any questions about the research to be answered. As a means to protect participants from any potential harm occurring as a consequence of their participation in the study, they were given direction to support organisations including the MMU Counselling, Health and Wellbeing Service, for emotional support.

Analysis and Discussion

In line with the reviewed literature, the students that were interviewed reported the influence of many different stressors at university (Chow and Flynn, 2016). Each of the participants coped with stress in different ways, but also had overlaps in their methods of coping. Additionally, they had variable perceptions of the effects of stress on their personal well-being. Through the process of IPA, overarching themes that were enriched in meaningful patterns developed across the transcripts. Furthermore, subordinate themes emerged during the process of interpretation.

Three superordinate themes emerged during the analytic process, offering a descriptive and personal account of the participants' experiences of stress-coping, with reference to their well-being. These were: (1) Positive Coping Techniques, (2) Maladaptive Coping Techniques, and (3) The Relationship Between Stress and Well-Being.

Positive Coping Techniques

The first emerging theme was 'Positive Coping Techniques', with relevant subthemes including: 'social support as a means to alleviate stress', 'using hobbies to counteract stress' and 'actively coping with stress'.

Social Support as a Means to Alleviate Stress

In line with the reviewed literature, social support has been found to reduce feelings of stress and enhance subjective well-being (Thoits, 1995). All of the participants discussed accessing social support as a means to alleviate stress, however, they went about this in multiple different ways. Jasmine discussed speaking to her mother to help manage her stress, as reflected in her interview, 'sometimes I think they know you better than you know yourself' (Jasmine, 298). As parents are key role models in most individuals lives from childhood, they may provide groundings for one's beliefs and be able to soothe their children when they are experiencing high levels of stress, in order to enhance their well-being. Annie sought social support from a counsellor, feeling as though this method 'organised my thoughts for me' (Annie, 299). When stress is too overwhelming for an individual to cope with alone, it seems helpful to use university support platforms to assist in coping with it, this was also suggested by Baqutayan and Mai (2012).

Feelings associated with receiving social support in times of stress was discussed by participants. Cameron discussed the negative effects of stress being more manageable when supported by others undergoing the same experience, as reflected in his transcript, 'at least people are finding someone to shiver next to with it' (Cameron, 354-355). This creates imagery of the bitter, cold and unappealing nature of stress, however, sharing this hardship with another individual has increased Cameron's subjective well-being, as he feels less alone on the matter. Jamie discussed the importance of being surrounded by people that he loves when feeling stressed:

I just wanna be around people that I like and like me and love me and I love and just be in that little bubble of cosiness (Jamie, 147-148)

This highlights the warmth that can be felt by an individual when they feel supported in undergoing stress, the image of a 'bubble' emphasises the protection from stress that social support has given this individual.

Social support as a means to alleviate stress would be classed as a form of emotion-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), as it assists an individual in lessening the emotional reactions that come as a result of stress. Social support as a factor in emotion-focused coping could develop this seminal model, as it focuses on a specific area of coping, rather than simply viewing it as an emotional response to stress.

Using Hobbies to Counteract Stress

Using hobbies to counteract stress has been recognised as helpful amongst these individuals, this was also found by Ragsdale et al. (2011), who suggested engaging in hobbies and recreational activities can reduce the negative effects of stress. Most of the participants discussed exercising to alleviate stress, Chris explained, 'go for a walk or even like exercise and stuff can help because you're releasing tension' (Chris, 59-60). Releasing built up tension has helped Chris to clear his mind when it is occupied with stressful thoughts and emotions, leading to a more positive mental well-being. Additionally, Jamie discussed the multifunctional purpose of exercise to combat stress:

finish the day off, go for a gym go home and relax or it's like I'm really stressed, I'm getting angry let's go on a run (Jamie, 233-234)

He discussed using the gym to relax after a stressful day, and using it to relieve tension in moments of heightened stress. This is comparable to work by Salmon (2001), who suggested that exercise leads to a reduction in tension, and resilience towards stress.

It has been suggested that low-effort activities can lead to a reduction in stress and enhancement of subjective well-being (Sonntag, 2001). Jasmine discussed writing a blog when feeling stressed, 'it's doing something for me, like doing my blog [...]that's always been my escape' (Jasmine, 457-458). This could be used as a place to vent her stresses, or simply as a distraction in stressful periods, nonetheless it will have positive implications for her subjective well-being, as she uses it to 'escape' from stress. Lily discussed using embroidery as relief from stress:

So sometimes I just do embroidery and cross stitch cos it's very repetitive and you just don't really think about it (Lily, 267-268)

These low-effort activities may provide relief from the usual chaotic schedule and high work load for students (Afsar and Kulsoom, 2015). Engaging in activities that do not require much mental effort enable the busy mind of a student to relax.

Mindfulness meditation has been noted as a successful method of minimising stress amongst these students, and previously has been found to enhance positive state of mind (Jain et al., 2007). Jasmine discussed using this technique in her interview, 'I did start like meditating which was good for the anxiety' (Jasmine, 102-103). Reducing her anxiety through meditation will have enhanced her mental well-being, as it involves having a clear mind, and may transport an individual away from their impending stress.

Actively Coping with Stress

Actively coping with stress has been found to protect individuals from its negative effects (Shields, 2001). The students interviewed discussed being organised to avoid stress, this was reflected in both Lily's and Annie's transcripts, 'I keep a diary trying to order it all' (Lily, 323-324), and 'I do tend to just give myself a bit of a structure and just do it bit by bit' (Annie, 125). Keeping a diary and focusing on combating stress in small tasks appears to be an effective way to deal with it, making it more manageable and not allowing oneself to become overwhelmed by the forthcoming tasks.

Jamie discussed actively managing stress, 'emailing tutors, organising meetings, getting stuff set out in stone and clarified and plans put together' (Jamie, 67-68). This shows high motivation to eradicate his stress, which would lead to enhanced mental well-being as it may give a sense of getting ahead on approaching tasks. Jasmine discussed having increased motivation and lower stress levels since having a better sense of herself, and a desired direction in life:

I started to get a better sense of where I wanted to go, of who I actually like was in a sense. So from that I dealt with the stress more because it gave me doing the work a purpose (Jasmine, 103-105)

This shows the importance of goals to engage an individual to be motivated to complete a task, to lead to a reduction in stress and enhancement in mental well-being through feelings of accomplishment. Motivation is positively correlated with one's course grade (Struthers et al., 2000), if an individual academically achieves it can enhance their mental well-being. This shows the value of organisation and direction in stress-coping to enhance well-being.

As highlighted in previous research, stress can be seen in a positive light to motivate individuals to engage in tasks (Saleh, 2009; cited in Persaud and Persaud, 2015), this was reflected in Chris' transcript, 'it's a necessary evil to push you on your way to doing certain things' (Chris, 99). Stress acts as a reminder for this individual to engage in important tasks, 'necessary evil' implies that stress is not something that he enjoys, however, it is required to motivate him in certain tasks. This enhanced motivation can improve one's subjective well-being.

Maladaptive Coping Techniques

The second superordinate theme to emerge was 'Maladaptive Coping Techniques', with relevant subthemes including: 'socialising and substance use to cope' and 'avoiding the problem'.

Socialising and Substance Use to Cope

Socialising and substance use may provide temporary relief from stress, however can negatively impact upon one's health or bear social stigma. Socialising may provide an individual with an escape from the stressful academic demands of university, also found by Macgeorge et al. (2005). This was reflected in Jamie's transcript, 'I just wanna go out and like go on a night out and just forget about it' (Jamie, 54). Although this may give him immediate gratification and temporarily relieve the stress, it does not eradicate the cause of the stress or deal with it systematically.

Many of the participants discussed drinking alcohol and smoking as a means to cope with stress, this was reflective of previous research (Lindström et al., 2013; Rice and Van Arsdale, 2010). Chris discussed his formation of bad habits when under stress, 'I'll like smoke more when I'm stressed, or drink more or just eat bad food like junk food' (Chris, 146-147). This triad of maladaptive activities as a response to stress can all have negative implications for one's physical well-being. Despite the fact that smoking is bad for one's health, it cannot be seen as entirely maladaptive as it has the ability to provide relaxation in times of heightened stress. Jamie discussed his

smoking habit, 'sit and smoke a few cigarettes while I'm still like shaking with fear' (Jamie, 241-242). This highlights the role of cigarettes in being able to calm an individual when under extreme stress.

Only one of the participants' discussed using recreational drugs as a means to alleviate stress, 'smoking more, getting stoned or drinking' (Jasmine, 48). Although smoking cannabis, or use of other substances may provide short-term relief from stress, it does not effectively eradicate the cause of the stress, meaning she would have to cope with this later on. Bottorff et al. (2009) found that students used cannabis to relieve stress, although this was only true for one participant in the present study, perhaps this may be undesirable due to stigma attached to this method of coping, as explored in previous literature (Hathaway et al., 2011), or other personal reasons. This therefore may not be a useful method of coping for a wider range of students.

Avoiding the Problem

Another emergent theme across the transcripts was avoiding the problem rather than searching for ways to cope with the imminent stress, this was also discovered in previous literature (Lo, 2002). This can be seen in Jasmine's transcript, 'Fight or flight... flight' (Jasmine, 38), this simple representation of avoidance of stress has strong foundations in psychology. Also creating powerful imagery of an individual flying away, escaping the negative consequences of stress. Jamie discussed how avoiding the problem results in the development of more stress:

it's just like a vicious circle of not wanting to do it cos it'll make me stressed but then by not doing it I'm gonna be more stressed because I'm running out of time. (Jamie, 120-122)

This creates cyclical imagery of stress as inescapable, and eventually it is inevitable that it will be faced. This emphasises the maladaptive nature of avoidance of stress, it cannot be avoided continually, as it would have serious negative repercussions on one's mental well-being. Individuals may feel that they have wasted their time not managing the stress, this was shown in Cameron's transcript, 'you feel like you've wasted that time worrying about it instead of actually doing it' (Cameron, 175-176). This implies that avoidance of stress was not an active decision for this individual, but instead rumination about the cause of stress led to neglecting the problem. If an individual avoids the cause of the stress rather than attempting to combat it, it can enhance their current stress levels, as seen in Annie's transcript, 'I make stress worse for myself rather than managing it' (Annie, 264). This shows that avoidance of stress could lead to reduced subjective well-being, through the means of maladaptive methods of coping. Avoiding the problem did not successfully alleviate the stress amongst the participants, which was also found in previous research (Kirkland, 1998).

The Relationship Between Stress and Well-Being

The final superordinate theme to emerge across the transcripts was 'The Relationship Between Stress and Well-Being', including relevant subthemes: 'stress and health' and 'stress and mental well-being'.

Stress and Health

Stress and health can be seen as two largely interrelated concepts, if an individual is less stressed they are likely to be happier, resulting in a healthier, longer life, as found in previous research by Diener and Chan (2011). Jasmine discussed her improved health since having learned to cope with stress better, 'I think it's improved my well-being a lot, I feel like I've got more energy, I feel healthier' (Jasmine, 319-320). This highlights the direct benefits of effectively coping with stress, showing that it improves an individual's subjective well-being. Lily discussed the negative effects of long-term stress on her health:

being stressed for a really long period this year was really... hurt my health as in my immune system, like I'm always ill (Lily, 145-147)

This shows how stress can be detrimental to an individual's physical well-being, an underproductive immune system links with delayed bodily processes, as discussed in previous literature (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2002). Stress must be prevented before reaching this point in order to promote better well-being amongst students. Jasmine discussed being able to physically see when someone is stressed, 'you can see in her face that she just gets so drained when she's stressed' (Jasmine, 337-338). Seeing the physical effects of stress suggests that it has taken its toll on one's immune system and consequently their health. She described her mother's appearance as 'drained' when she is stressed, creating imagery of a pale and empty shell of a person, highlighting the destructive nature of stress on one's health and well-being.

In Jamie's interview, he discussed negative implications his choice of maladaptive coping strategies have had on his health:

smoking has a big impact on basically my whole life well not my whole life, but it obviously does affect your breathing and how well you can get about (Jamie, 177-179)

This demonstrates how one's choice of coping strategies will have consequences for their health, in this case harmfully. Gustems-Carnicer and Calderón (2012) highlighted the link between coping strategies and one's well-being. This shows that the two concepts are interdependent on each other acting in a constructive way, in order for the individual to successfully manage stress to promote a healthy well-being.

Stress and Mental Well-Being

Stress can have undesirable effects on one's mental well-being, in terms of changing an individual's mental state, affecting one's mood and evoking racing thoughts. Across the transcripts, it has been found that stress can affect one's frame of mind, as reflected in Cameron's transcript, 'I'm completely different in mind right now to when I'm really stressed and can't see past what the problem is' (Cameron, 144-146). This shows that heightened stress can impede one's ability to effectively cope with it, it may be easier to consider ways to successfully combat stress when an individual is unconstrained by its negative effects. Additionally, Lily discussed that her brain does not operate to the best of its ability when undergoing stress, 'your mind doesn't even function when you're so stressed' (Lily, 66-67). This shows the damage that stress can elicit on one's mental well-being, leaving an individual

unable to efficiently manage their stress. Landis et al. (2007) highlighted that lack of control has a tendency to lead to maladaptive coping strategies, in turn these coping strategies can have negative effects on one's well-being.

Stress can also negatively influence one's mood, as shown in Jasmine's transcript, 'once you get into that mindset it's just like... I just keep getting proper low' (Jasmine, 380-381). A low mood could damage one's ability to constructively cope with stress, as it may leave an individual feeling unable to engage in the imminent stressful tasks. This therefore could have undesirable consequences on one's mental well-being, as they may feel insignificant or disheartened. Chris discussed the instability of his moods when undergoing stress, 'it can make your moods quite manic' (Chris, 45). Interchangeable moods may make it more difficult to handle stress, as it is unpredictable when these changes will occur, and an individual may have exerted their energy on other tasks, rather than focusing on the stressor and how to combat it. An overactive mind as a result of stress can impair one's ability to sleep:

I often find that stress impedes my sleeping, like just my mind is going all the time, so it means that I don't get to sleep and even if I do it's quite a light or broken sleep (Annie, 137-139)

A mind full of stressful thoughts may be overwhelming for an individual, leaving them unable to sleep, this could cause more stress as it may lead to delay in coping with the stressful task. As discussed in the literature review, lack of sleep can lead to health problems (Burt et al., 2014), which in turn could add to the stress experienced by the individual.

Summary

After the analytic process and discussing the three superordinate themes, it is clear that individuals must find the methods of coping that are suited to them. It appears that positive coping techniques alleviate the stress by focusing on the stressor directly. Whereas maladaptive techniques may put an individual at ease in stressful situations, however do not target the stressor directly in order to deal with the problem. In order to maintain a high level of well-being in stressful situations, individuals' must actively employ their suited coping mechanisms, to help relieve the stress and decrease the likelihood of its negative effects.

There were some limitations to the present study, firstly, all of the participants were white and British. This restricts the research as it does not account for people from different cultures studying at university in the United Kingdom, as coping with stress may be experienced differently when this is taken into account. Additionally, as this qualitative research has focused on specific case studies, the most successful methods of coping found to enhance one's well-being may not be generalisable to a wider population of students.

In order to apply the findings of this research to help future students learn the most successful ways to manage their stress, the researcher has sent a document including anonymised quotes to the MMU Counselling, Health and Wellbeing Service (Appendix Nine). It may also provide university staff with adequate information to better support their students when they are undergoing stress.

Reflexivity

According to Willig (2001) qualitative research involves two types of reflexivity. Firstly, personal, which relates to the researcher's personal morals and experiences, and how they may have affected the research, and also epistemological reflexivity, which refers to assumptions made during research which may have had an impact on the outcome.

The present study consisted of semi-structured interviews with students, this was intended to gather rich, personal and meaningful data with regards to stress-coping in students. As stress is a personal and individual experience, qualitative research is well suited.

As a student myself, I have experienced high levels of stress that has come as a result of various environmental stressors and high academic demand. I have seen other students unsure of the best methods to cope with stress, and have noticed the adverse effects stress seems to have on their subjective well-being. For these reasons, I was inspired to conduct this research in attempt to improve students' knowledge of stress-coping to promote a healthy well-being.

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