

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Stress-Management Strategies among First-Year Students at a South African University: A Qualitative Study

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### *Abstract*

*This article reports on a qualitative study that explored the use of coping strategies among first-year students in managing academic-related stressors. Qualitative data were collected using a non-probability and purposive sample. A total of 225 first-year students who were registered at a South African university participated in the study by writing naïve sketches. A narrative framework was adopted and data were analysed using thematic analysis. Six categories of stressors emerged from the data and were categorised as financial, spiritual, physical, emotional, mental and institutional. The qualitative findings also pointed to three prominent coping strategies, namely problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and meaning-making. The reported outcomes of employing coping strategies included both positive and negative aspects. An overarching theme, entitled 'hanging in there' was interpreted from the data and points to an innate sense of hope that assists participants in managing stressors. Implications for student affairs practitioners and areas for further study are discussed.*

### *Keywords*

*academic stress; coping; meaning; psychological stress; qualitative research*

### *Introduction*

Higher education plays a crucial role in stimulating a country's economy and empowering young people with the skills, knowledge and attitudes required for the 21st-century workplace (CHE, 2013). However, numerous factors can negatively affect a university student's pursuit of a tertiary qualification (Cilliers, 2014). These factors include, but are not limited to, financial constraints, interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges, academic under-preparedness and difficulties in balancing academic and personal life (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Nelson & Low, 2011; Van Zyl, 2016). The concept of academic stress emerges as a prominent theme when considering factors that enhance low retention, high dropout and poor performance (Bojuwoye, 2002; Cotton, Dollard & De Jonge, 2002; Kausar, 2010). Academic stress refers to demands placed on students, and others, within the academic environment (Van Heerden-Pieterse, 2015).

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A rich body of research indicates that university students are exposed to various stressors on a daily basis (Bojuwoye, 2002; Burge, 2009; Kim, Newton, Downey & Benton, 2010; Mudhovozi, 2011). Amongst other things, university students are under pressure to perform academically, adapt to the higher education environment, and manage finances (Letseka, Breier & Visser 2009; Nelson & Low, 2011). Data suggest that university students often view stress as a negative experience, tend to adopt ineffective coping strategies, and struggle to access resources that could assist them in managing challenges (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Mudhovozi, 2011; Nelson & Low, 2011). When stress is perceived negatively, and the required coping strategies and supportive resources are lacking, students may become impaired (Kausar, 2010).

The impaired student is at a heightened risk for the development of, amongst other things, psychological disorders and academic attrition (Seligman, 2011; Van Zyl & Rothman, 2012). The latter could ultimately result in low quality of life among university students (Van Zyl & Rothman, 2012).

Within the university context, student affairs practitioners are required to assist students in developing the strategies required to cope with stressors and establish academic–personal life balance, amongst other things (Van Lingen & De Jager, 2011; Van Heerden–Pieterse, 2015). Ample international evidence exists about the experience of stress and coping among university students in international contexts (Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Burge, 2009; Kim et al., 2010). However, stress and coping among undergraduate students within a South African context deserves more attention (Govender, Mkhabela, Hlongwane, Jalim & Jetha, 2015; Naidoo, Van Wyk, Higgins–Opitz & Moodley, 2014). Moreover, research explicitly focused on the role that student affairs practitioners can play in addressing academic stress is needed.

The South African literature on the topic of stress among university students has relied primarily on quantitative research designs (Mudhovozi, 2011; Wilson, Warton & Louw, 1998). Whereas quantitative data offers certain statistical advantages, it fails to explore and interrogate the meaning of participants’ unique experiences and conceptions on a specific topic (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative studies could, therefore, add a novel perspective by giving voice to participants’ unique experiences and conceptions of coping with academic stressors (Radcliffe & Lester, 2003).

It is against the above-mentioned backdrop that this article reports on a qualitative study that explored students’ use of coping strategies in managing academic-related stressors. The study was guided by the following three research questions: (1) What are the prominent stressors that first-year students encounter? (2) What coping strategies do first-year students use to manage stressors? and (3) How effective are students’ reported coping strategies in dealing with stressors?

The article is organised as follows: First, a review of the literature is provided, and then the research methodology is presented. Next, the findings from the qualitative study are discussed. In conclusion, the key findings are summarised, limitations are discussed and avenues for further study are suggested.

### *Stress and Coping: Theoretical Conceptualisation*

In this review of the literature, theoretical aspects relevant to the qualitative study being reported on are discussed. First, an overview of the stress within the academic context is provided. Then, the concept of coping is discussed. Lastly, the concept of meaning-making is examined.

#### **Stress in the academic context**

“One of the oldest laws in psychology holds that, beyond a moderate level, increases in anxiety and worry erode mental abilities” (Ramesar, Koortzen & Oosthuizen, 2009, p. 43). A growing body of research indicates that students in higher education are exposed to ever-greater levels of stress (Kausar, 2010; Nelson & Low, 2011; Van Zyl, 2016). Data furthermore indicate that increases in stress levels could negatively impinge on students’ academic performance and levels of well-being (Moseki & Schulze, 2010; Mudhovozi, 2011; Van Zyl & Rothman, 2012). The causes of stress among university students are numerous and include aspects such as difficulties in adjusting to the university culture and context, socio-economic challenges, poor interpersonal relationships, intrapersonal problems and limited institutional support (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Van Zyl, Gravett & De Bruin, 2012).

Govender et al. (2015) point to three categories of stressors reported in the literature, namely personal, academic and university-related stressors. In a study among a sample of Australian students, Burge (2009) identified additional normative categories of stressors. These categories of stressors include academic, time and balance, work, intrapersonal, relationships, interpersonal, family and quality of teaching challenges. However, it is not clear whether the categories identified by Burge (2009) would necessarily apply to a South African context, specifically in light of the socio-economic disparities between the two countries. In addition to normative categories, students enrolled at South African universities are also exposed to context-specific stressors. These context-specific stressors include, but are not limited to, being first-generation students, socio-economic challenges, high incidence of traumatic stress and, in some instances, a school system that does not adequately prepare them for the challenges of higher education (Suliman et al., 2009; Van Heerden-Pieterse, 2015).

A study among South African medical students identified the academic curriculum, workload issues, personal problems, communication and language difficulties, and financial challenges as prominent stressors (Naidoo et al., 2014). Data also suggest that a variety of factors outside of the university context could impede students’ well-being (Van Heerden-Pieterse, 2015). Students should, therefore, be assisted in developing appropriate coping strategies to deal with stress in constructive ways (Nelson & Low, 2011).

#### **Coping**

The concept of coping refers to cognitive and behavioural strategies persons use to manage situations that they perceive could potentially exceed their personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping has two main functions, namely, to regulate emotions (emotion-

focused coping) and to direct behaviour in addressing the problem (problem-focused coping) (Ramesar et al., 2009).

Emotion-focused coping is directed towards internal states, rather than external situations, that may have triggered a stress reaction and are more likely to be initiated when individuals appraise situations as harmful, threatening and potentially overwhelming. Examples of emotion-focused coping strategies are wishful thinking, minimising, and avoidance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Problem-focused coping is directed towards altering, addressing or managing external stressors and it includes aspects such as drawing on social support and initiating problem-solving behaviours. Problem-focused coping may be most appropriate when dealing with a stressor that is changeable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In addition to employing coping strategies, recent literature suggests that stress may also have a positive or motivating effect on persons. Amongst others, Dweck (2010) and McGonigal (2015) argue that adopting a growth mindset could assist people in viewing stress as a challenge, instead of harmful. Seligman (2006) adds that adopting an optimistic, versus pessimistic, perspective when encountering stress, could help persons to reinterpret stressors as opportunities for growth and personal development. Thus, stress could, depending on a person's explanatory style, be viewed as either overpowering or motivational (Dweck, 2006; McGonigal, 2015; Seligman, 2006).

Contemporary areas of investigation have also pointed to the importance of, amongst other things, mindfulness, meditation, cognitive behavioural strategies and healthy living through exercise, nutrition and sleep as relevant coping strategies (Brown & Gerberg, 2010; Cuddy, 2015; Robertson, 2010). An in-depth discussion of these, and other, coping strategies falls mostly beyond the scope of this article. The interested reader is referred to Brown and Gerberg (2010), Cuddy (2015), Haidt (2006), Robertson (2010) and McGonigal (2015).

### **Meaning-making**

The concept of meaning-making refers to the capacity to recognise order, coherence and purpose in life, as well as to set, pursue and attain goals that could result in a sense of fulfilment (Steger, 2009). Literature indicates that actively engaging in meaning-making when encountering stressors could lead to psychological and spiritual growth and serve as a protective factor against the negative consequences associated with stress (Manning-Jones, De Terte & Stephens, 2015; Park, 2010; Steger, 2009).

A qualitative study by Mason (2017) involving a sample of first-year South African nursing students identified four conceptions of meaning as critical buffers against stressors, namely stress as an avenue to meaning, compassion satisfaction, relational meaning, and meaning through spirituality. Mason (2017) argues that actively searching for meaning could assist students in coping more effectively with stressors.

Various sources of meaning, such as religious orientation, social relationships, work, and academic studies appear to play a role in supporting students in pursuing and realising important life outcomes (Nell, 2014). Thus, the process of active meaning-making may

serve as an important coping strategy (Nell, 2014; Manning-Jones et al., 2015; Mason, 2017). Meaning-making processes could result in numerous meanings that are derived following stressful experiences. Examples of such meaning are identifying positive aspects and altered optimistic global beliefs about life experiences (Park & George, 2013).

## *Research Method*

### **Research design**

A qualitative design was adopted to conduct the study (Creswell, 2007). In adopting a qualitative design, the study was positioned within a narrative framework (Creswell, 2007).

Narrative inquiry is an approach to gathering, studying and analysing participants' depictions of experiences and events (Riessman, 2002). In narrative inquiry, people are considered as embodiments of lived stories. Consequently, a narrative approach aims to uncover the multiple layers of participants' experiences and qualitative meanings that are expressed as stories. The basic tenets of narrative inquiry rendered this approach complementary to the goal of the study being reported on, namely to explore and gain an understanding of university students' use of coping strategies in dealing with academic stressors (Riessman, 2002).

### **Research context**

The study was conducted at a large South African residential university where the researcher is employed as a social science researcher. The specific university has a population of approximately 60 000 enrolled students. The student population is diverse and accurately resembles the broader South African demographics (Statistics South Africa, 2016). A large proportion of students at this university falls into the categories described by the Department of Higher Education and Training as the 'missing middle' and 'low income.' Thus, in addition to the expected stressors of university life, many of the students are also confronted with socio-economic challenges (Ray, 2016). For practical purposes, such as logistical constraints, access to students and limited research funding, data were only collected from one of the specific university's nine campuses.

### **Sample**

A nonprobability convenient, purposive and voluntary sample of 225 first-year South African students participated in the qualitative study (Creswell, 2014). Criteria for inclusion were that participants had to be enrolled in a particular academic programme at a specific campus of the mentioned South African university and be 18 years of age or older. An open invitation to participate in the study was sent to all students who fulfilled the mentioned criteria (N = 452). A total of 225 students (female = 139, male = 86, age range 18–25), who complied with the criteria for inclusion voluntarily agreed to participate and wrote naïve sketches about their experiences.

## Data collection and procedure

Data were collected using naïve sketches. Giorgi (1985) describes naïve sketches as documents written by participants to depict their stories and perspectives about the theme in question.

In the study, participants were first instructed to write about their experiences of stress, the coping strategies they used to manage stressors and how these coping strategies affected academic–personal life balance. Then, they were requested to draw a picture or provide a paper cut-out of a picture that depicted the process of coping for them. Lastly, participants were invited to write an essay about the picture or image that they provided. More specifically, they were asked to explain what the picture or image represented and how effective the depicted coping strategy was for them in dealing with academic-related stressors. Participants were requested to include personal examples to offer depth to their answers. The 225 naïve sketches varied in length from four to 13 pages.

According to Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Painter (2006), saturation is reached in an exploratory study featuring a homogeneous sample, such as the study being reported on here, after 6–8 sampling units are collected or when the new material does not add new insights to the qualitative interpretation. It became apparent that data saturation was reached after studying approximately 180 naïve sketches, since an adequate number of sampling units were collected and no new insights emerged from the analysis. However, since 225 naïve sketches were received, all were included in the data analysis process.

## Data analysis

The software programme Atlas.ti, version 7 was used to manage the qualitative data analysis process. A narrative thematic approach was adopted in analysing the qualitative data (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2011; Riessman, 2002). The narrative approach to qualitative analysis assisted in illuminating participants' underlying assumptions, beliefs and meanings that shaped and informed the specific application of coping strategies to manage academic stressors. Thematic analysis, consisting of five interrelated steps, namely (1) familiarisation, (2) inducing themes, (3) coding, (4) elaboration, and (5) interpretation and checking, served as a guide to analyse the naïve sketches qualitatively within a narrative framework (Henning et al., 2011; Riessman, 2002).

## Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines for qualitative research were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The following measures were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness: using an independent coder who had extensive experience in the field of qualitative research to verify the credibility of the analysis and interpretation; collecting rich data through narrative sketches; participant verification; using an audit trail; fully describing the research method and procedure; and ongoing reflective practice.

## Research ethics

The university where data were collected granted permission to conduct the study (Ref. #: 2014/07/004). All identifying information (e.g. surnames, names and student numbers)

was treated confidentially and removed before the data analysis. No course credit or financial benefits were offered for participation. All participants gave individual written informed consent.

### *Findings and Discussion*

One major theme emerged following the qualitative analysis and was labelled ‘hanging in there’. This major theme was then organised into three themes, namely the types of stressors, coping strategies and outcomes associated with coping efforts. Each theme was further discussed in terms of relevant sub-themes. Figure 1 serves as a graphical representation of the three themes with the overarching theme.

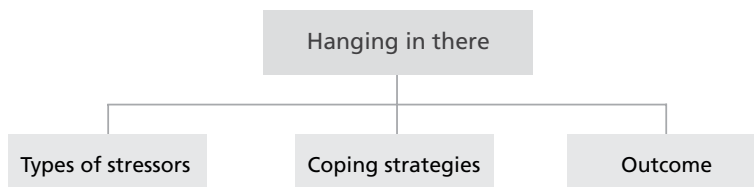


Figure 1: The three themes with the overarching theme

Table 1 serves as a summative index of the themes and the sub-themes. The frequency of participants’ references to the particular themes and sub-themes is also displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes, sub-themes and frequencies of responses

Hanging in there				
Themes	Sub-themes	Females n (% of N)	Males (% of N)	Total N (%)
Types of stressors	Financial	137 (61.43%)	86 (38.56%)	223 (99.11%)
	Spiritual	132 (64.71%)	72 (35.29%)	204 (90.67%)
	Physical	135 (66.18%)	69 (33.82%)	204 (90.67%)
	Emotional	131 (64.53%)	72 (35.47%)	203 (90.22%)
	Mental	130 (65.00%)	70 (35.00%)	200 (88.89%)
	Institutional	128 (64.65%)	70 (35.35%)	198 (88.00%)
Coping strategies	Problem-focused	115 (58.97%)	80 (41.02%)	195 (86.67%)
	Emotion-focused	122 (63.21%)	71 (36.79%)	193 (85.78%)
	Meaning-making	118 (68.21%)	55 (31.79%)	173 (76.89%)
Outcome	Positive	135 (61.64%)	84 (38.36%)	219 (97.33%)
	Negative	71 (62.83%)	43 (37.38%)	113 (38.10%)
	Acknowledgement	128 (56.89%)	82 (36.44%)	210 (93.33%)
	Taking action	132 (58.67%)	79 (35.11%)	211 (93.78%)
	Taking stock and moving forward	119 (52.89%)	73 (32.44%)	192 (85.33%)

*Note: ‘% of N’ means gender percentage of the row frequency of responses.*

In the next section, the three qualitative themes are discussed. Then, the three themes are integrated and discussed in relation to the major theme, ‘hanging in there’. Due to space limitations, only selected verbatim quotes are included to substantiate the interpretations. The ellipsis (...) at the beginning or end of particular quotes is meant to indicate that participants included additional information in the naïve sketches before and after the verbatim quotations that are included. The frequency of responses to a specific theme is indicated. For example, 90/225 indicates that 40% of participants referred to a specific thematic idea. The referencing system in parenthesis denotes participant number (e.g. P#1 for Participant 1), gender and age.

### *Theme 1: Types of stressors*

Six prominent types of stressors emerged following the data analysis, namely financial, spiritual, physical, emotional, mental and institutional stressors. These six stressors are now discussed.

Against a backdrop of growing socio-economic inequality, scores of young South Africans have come to view access to higher education as a way to a better life. In fact, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training describes higher education as an avenue to an empowered life (DHET, 2013). However, high tuition fees, amongst other things, constitute a significant source of stress for students enrolled at South African higher education institutions (Ray, 2016). The majority of participants in this study (99.11%) indicated that financial stressors were of particular concern. One participant, a 19-year-old female, described her experience as follows:

*“Financial problems are my major stressor ... I know how important my education is and how many doors it will open for me in the future, but it is not easy to overcome the hurdle of paying class fees, paying for residence ... I think this is the biggest obstacle that most students face.”* (P#82)

Financial stressors appear to be both a national and an international phenomenon (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). While alternative funding strategies are being investigated (Wild, 2016), the reality at the grassroots level is that students are experiencing significant stress due to financial concerns (Van Zyl, 2016). Participant 175, a 21-year-old male, narrated the challenge as follows:

*“Surviving from day to day is a never-ending difficulty ... I try to focus on creating a bright future, but some days it is tough to remain positive when I do not know how I am going to fund my studies or pay back my debt.”*

Previous research has also indicated that students who were struggling financially and had accrued debt during their education performed less well academically compared to other students (Ross, Cleland & Macleod, 2006).

In addition to financial challenges, a large section of the sample (204/225) indicated that spirituality served as a source of stress in their lives. Amongst other things, participants reported that they struggled to straddle the tension between modern-day living or secular values and spiritual values. One participant described the challenge as follows:



*“For me, living in this age, it is difficult ... the Bible says one thing, but in our lives, we do different things. An example is caring for the less fortunate. The Bible says we must give to the less fortunate, but ignore them on the streets.”* (P#144, male, 19)

According to Frankl (2010), young adults living in the modern world are confronted by spiritual questions that were, in past decades, reserved for later developmental stages. Consequently, younger adults are confronted with existential issues related to ethical living, religious belief and the finiteness of life (Nell, 2014; Yalom, 1980). Thus, in addition to everyday materialistic stressors, such as financial difficulties, participants also reported experiencing spiritual stressors.

Furthermore, participants stated that they experienced physical (90.67%), emotional (90.22%) and mental (88.89%) stressors. A total of 198 participants (88%) also described institutional stressors as a concern. In this regard, participants pointed to curriculum concerns (“... it is important that the curriculum addresses aspects that are of concern to people living in an African context ...” P#37, female, 18), academic challenges (“A major stress for me is studying and preparing for exams ...” P#123, female, 19) and protest action that forced the university to close (“We never know when there will be a strike. You just arrive here in the morning to find the gates closed” P#145, male, 23).

Institutional stressors, such as curriculum reform, providing academic support services to students and the negative impact of protest action on the management of universities are areas of particular concern and have been identified in previous research (CHE, 2013; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Naidoo et al., 2014). For student affairs practitioners, the resultant impact of these stressors on students is of specific relevance. Student affairs services should remain vigilant in assisting students to develop the required coping strategies to manage stressors resulting from institutionally related challenges effectively. Amongst other things, student affairs practitioners could develop and empirically evaluate training programmes focused on equipping students with the requisite skills for effectively addressing practical concerns linked to stressful experiences (Cilliers, 2014; Naidoo et al., 2014).

### *Theme 2: Coping strategies utilised to manage stressors*

The majority of participants (86.67%) indicated that they adopt problem-focused strategies to deal with stressors, e.g.

*“I try to remain analytical when dealing with stress ... will try to define the problem ... come up with possible solutions ... try to use the best option.”* (P#170, male, 20)

However, a large section of the sample (85.78%) also indicated that they employ emotion-focused coping in dealing with stressors, e.g.

*“I will do things that I enjoy, like going to a movie or dancing.”* (P#69, female, 19)

Research suggests that, compared to emotion-focused strategies, problem-focused coping tends to assist people in dealing with stressors in more constructive ways (Penley, Tomaka & Wiebe, 2002). However, in real-life circumstances, people are inclined to use a combination of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies (Govender et al., 2015; Ramesar et al., 2009).

A concerning trend identified in the data was that (78.22%) of participants also reported making use of avoidance as a coping strategy. The following quote substantiates this finding:

*“Sometimes I just act as if the problem does not exist ... some students numb their problems away with alcohol.”* (P#117, female, 18)

There is literature to suggest that maladaptive coping, such as using non-prescribed medication and alcohol, and avoidance could negatively impinge on academic performance, self-esteem and well-being (Govender et al., 2015; Penley et al., 2002).

A significant proportion of participants (173/225) pointed to meaning-making as a coping strategy. One participant, a 23-year-old female, stated,

*“I believe that there is a higher power guiding me ... life will also be challenging, but through the challenges, I learn new lessons that can make me stronger in the long term.”* (P#89)

Frankl (2010) hypothesises that stressors could serve to awaken people’s spiritual aspirations in their search for growth and meaning against the backdrop of a stressful reality. However, this would not just necessitate the application of adequate coping strategies but would require a meaning-centred transformation (Yalom, 1980). Hence, through meaning-making, people reframe stressors as opportunities for personal growth and development (Mason, 2017; Mason & Nel, 2015). In this regard, Seligman (2011) calls on humans to search for personally meaningful goals that can guide their behaviour during, amongst other things, stressful times. Student affairs practitioners have a significant role to play in supporting students to search for, uncover and reframe stressful challenges in meaningful terms (De Villiers, 2014).

### *Theme 3: Outcome of coping efforts*

A total of 219 participants (97.33%) reported that using coping strategies resulted in positive outcomes. These reported positive results included strong interpersonal relationships (*“By sharing my problems with friends, we tended to become closer and more trusting”* P#138, female, 19), enhanced self-esteem (*“After solving my problems I began to see myself in a more positive light ... began to believe in myself”* P#44, female, 20) and improved academic performance (*“Learning how to deal with stress has helped me perform better in my studies ... stress can eat away at you and cause you to lose motivation and even fail”* P#194, male, 19). This finding is consistent with the extant literature and points to the importance of establishing a context that supports students in developing adequate coping strategies (Bojuwoye, 2002; De Villiers, 2014; Ramesar et al., 2009).

A proportion of participants (38.10%) also suggested that inappropriate coping strategies resulted in negative outcomes. Participant 176, a 19-year-old male, mused that *“Poor coping strategies has caused me to fall behind in my academic studies. I tried just to ignore my financial problems, but it got the better of me. Looking back I realise that I should have looked for help to cope better. It was a hard lesson to learn. Now I can say that one must not be afraid to ask for help.”* The majority of participants who reported negative outcomes cited avoidance strategies (*“... I just pretend that my problems don’t exist and hope they will be gone in the morning”* P#37, female, 18), being ashamed to

seek help (“... it’s embarrassing to ask for help ... makes me feel like a loser to admit that I am not coping” P#167, male, 19) and limited insight into the stressors they were facing (“... once education becomes free, there wouldn’t be any worries about finances anymore...” P#155, male, 18).

The preceding set of quotes suggests that a subset of participants expressed attributes (in the stated examples: personal dispositions, limited financial resources, and poor commitment) that may have had an adverse effect on the integration of academic and social experiences. These negative experiences could have been exacerbated by limited interaction with, amongst other things, student affairs services, as one participant explained: “Looking back I realise that I should have made use of the referral to the student counselling unit. Perhaps that could have helped to cope better and get better marks” P#183, male, 21).

Student affairs practitioners ought to remain mindful of the fact that the mere availability of services may not necessarily be adequate. Instead, students may have difficulty in approaching specific services such as counselling or psychotherapy (Egan, 2009; Gladding, 2014). Often psychological illiteracy and a failure to acknowledge the benefits of counselling could act as deterrents, and those who make use of these services could feel stigmatised and perceive the services to be culturally unsuitable, inappropriate, or lacking in their confidential handling of matters (Egan, 2009; Gladding, 2014).

### *Discussion: ‘Hanging in there’*

In the preceding discussions, three qualitative themes were discussed. First, prominent stressors that participants experienced were highlighted. The six prominent stressors that participants narrated were financial, spiritual, physical, mental, emotional and institutional. Additionally, three prominent coping strategies were discussed, namely problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and meaning-making. Lastly, it was indicated that participants who employed problem-focused coping strategies and meaning-making were more likely to report positive outcomes. A prominent narrative that serves to integrate the three qualitative themes, namely ‘hanging in there’, was interpreted from the data.

‘Hanging in there’ was a term used by some participants to explain how they managed to cope with academic stressors and what the outcome of these coping processes entailed. Thus, the theme ‘hanging in there’, serves as a higher level of conceptualisation and integrates the three themes (types of stressors, coping strategies and outcome) into a coherent whole. This theme is graphically represented in Figure 2.

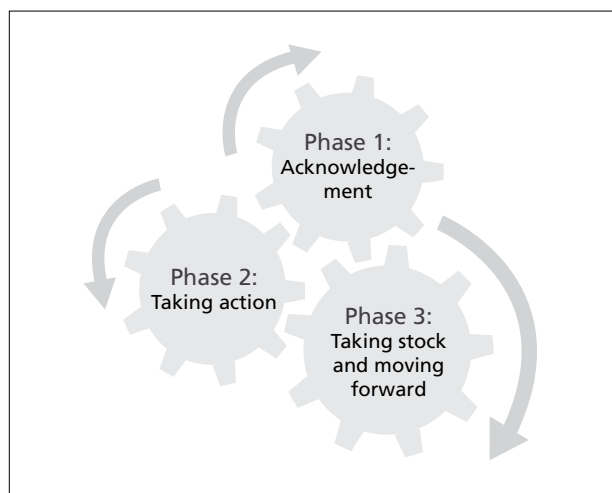


Figure 2: Graphical representation: ‘Hanging in there’

In Figure 2, the three phases of the theme ‘hanging in there’ are presented as interlocking gears. This illustration suggests that the three phases are iterative and that the coping process, as described by participants, is dynamic. More specifically, the three phases flow into each other, and the end of one phase gives rise to the next.

The first phase of the ‘hanging in there’ theme relates to the acknowledgement of a specific stressor and attempting to make sense of it within a person’s specific set of life circumstances. Literature suggests that stressors affect individuals in proportion to their life circumstances, available resources and psychological make-up (Egan, 2009). A significant proportion of participants (93.33%) indicated that the acknowledgement of stressors is an important component in initiating a healthy coping response. One participant explained the acknowledgement phase as follows:

*“Financial problems are enormous in my life. I must make a plan to deal with study fees, accommodation, and the likes. Education is like winning the lottery; it changes everything for you. But education also has a cost.”*  
(P#195, male, 18)

Another participant suggested that acknowledgement entails accepting reality as it is and then making a plan:

*“One must remember to be honest in your dealings ... life is hard but you must accept it and then move ahead ... make the best of things”*  
(P#188, male, 21)

The second phase of the coping process entitled ‘hanging in there’ is labelled ‘taking action.’ Participants agreed (93.78%) that people need to take constructive action when confronted by stressors. Therefore, ‘hanging in there’ does not denote a passive process. To the contrary, it refers to a process of actively engaging with, amongst other things, stressors to identify and act upon a solution.

Crisis theory suggests that humans are motivated to restore the sense of disequilibrium brought about by stressful experiences (Herman, 1992). In working towards re-establishing equilibrium in one’s life, people are advised to adopt an optimistic view of the future

(Seligman, 2006, 2011). That is, a better future is imagined. In this regard, participants suggested that ‘hanging in there’ is founded upon hope for a better future. One participant, a 22-year-old female, described her experience as follows:

*“For me hope is always alive. I hope for a better tomorrow. A brighter tomorrow is what inspires and motivates me today to deal with difficult times”* (P#29)

According to Snyder (2002), the construct of hope is based on two key concepts, namely pathways thinking and agency. The term ‘pathways thinking’ refers to the capacity of identifying avenues, and in the case of stressors, alternative avenues towards achieving goals. Agency points to the motivation and personal inclination to pursue the pathways that were identified (Snyder, 2002). From the data, it became apparent that hope – pathways thinking and agency – are crucial components of coping with academic stressors, as discussed in the following sections.

The final phase of ‘hanging in there’ is entitled ‘taking stock and moving forward’. The data revealed that participants (85.33%) regarded stressors as normal occurrences during the academic process. Amongst other things, participants’ narrative accounts suggested that stress should not necessarily be viewed as antagonistic. Rather, stress was regarded as a constant companion on the journey to and through higher education. Thus, stress could be likened to a character that forms part of students’ lives within the higher education context. A 22-year-old male described it as follows:

*“Stress is a constant companion at university. I experience stress when I sit for exams. There is stress when I do group work and must explain things in front of a class.”* (P#189)

Participants indicated that there were valuable lessons to be learned from stressful experiences as a ‘constant companion’. A rich body of literature has also attested to the potentially growth-enhancing qualities that could be gleaned from dealing with stress in constructive ways (Dweck, 2006; Herman, 1992; Manning-Jones et al., 2015; McGonigal, 2015). A 21-year-old female participant explained as follows:

*“I try to learn from my past experiences. Sometimes stress is difficult at the moment, but things get better, and life goes on. One of my most difficult challenges was when I fell pregnant. In my mind, I became a stronger person because of that difficulty.”* (P#49)

Snyder and colleagues suggest that high hope students tend to draw on past experiences, regardless of whether goals were achieved or not, as diagnostic feedback to inform subsequent actions and plans (Snyder et al., 1996). In contrast, low hope students tend to adopt pessimistic attitudes that negatively affect subsequent activities (Snyder et al., 1996). Research by Duckworth (2016) also indicates that the concept of grit, which refers to the passion, perseverance and sustained self-control to pursue personally relevant and long-term goals, is related to the concept of hope. The qualitative analysis suggested that participants displayed characteristics of high hope and grit, such as goal-directedness (“I have specific goals outlined for my life ...” P#77, female, 19), optimistic inclinations (“My belief is that people should try to find positive things even when their lives are stressful” P#82, female, 19) and self-efficacy (“What I have learned is to work hard for success ... must set your mind on a goal and then go for it” P#156, male, 20). Conceptually, the notion of taking stock and moving forward appears to be related to the concept of hope. Participant 65, a 20-year-old female described such

a relationship as follows: “The future always brings new beginnings ... must trust that good things will come your way ... that helps to keep me focused.” Additionally, participant 47, a 24-year-old female, included the following image that depicts the journey of dealing with stress (Figure 3):



Figure 3: Dealing with stress (Participant 47)

Participant 47 narrated her experience, as depicted in Figure 3, as follows:

*“When life begins you are always happy. When you become older things become stressful. You must learn how to deal with difficult times. At the end of your life, hopefully, you can look back and be proud of what you achieved. You will see the meaning at the end of the journey. For now, I just keep believing.”*  
 (female, 24)

### Conclusion

This article reports on a qualitative study that explored university students’ use of coping strategies to manage academic-related stressors. The qualitative data revealed that even though participants experienced a number of stressors, they engaged in a variety of coping

strategies to manage challenges. It also became evident that problem-focused coping strategies and meaning-making were more likely to bring about positive outcomes.

The theme 'hanging in there' served as a conceptual lens to develop a more holistic understanding of the qualitative results. Participants revealed that acknowledging stressors was an essential first step in dealing with challenges. Next, the data suggested that taking action with a hopeful future in mind was an important consideration. Lastly, the idea of taking stock and moving forward suggested that participants understood that they could learn valuable lessons from past experiences, which can inform future coping efforts.

The qualitative findings raise awareness of the stressful challenges that students encounter in the higher education sphere. Furthermore, the data revealed that students are not passive agents, but tend to act in proactive ways to cope with stressors. However, the data also serve as a call for student affairs practitioners to remain active in assisting students, amongst others, to deal with stress constructively. Student affairs practitioners could offer the following specific interventions to students:

- Workshops that provide information on the nature of stress and teach practical coping skills (De Villiers, 2014; Van Heerden-Pieterse, 2015);
- Developmental programmes focusing on the role that meaning can play in managing stressors (Mason & Nel, 2015); and
- Awareness campaigns focused on demystifying and destigmatising the role that student affairs services, with a specific emphasis on counselling and psychotherapeutic services, can fulfil in assisting students to deal with stress (Egan, 2009; Gladding, 2014).

The study was not without limitations. First, the concepts of stress and coping are dynamic. A plethora of literature has addressed, amongst other things, differing classification systems of coping strategies. Offering an in-depth discussion of these various classification systems was deemed to fall mostly outside the scope of this article. Hence, different classification systems could have offered different insights into participants' conceptions and use of coping strategies. Additionally, the findings only offer a glimpse of participants' perspectives from a single university's perspectives on stress and coping. Moreover, data were collected at the start of the second academic semester in 2015. It could be speculated that a different qualitative picture may have emerged if data were collected at a different point in time, for example during the height of #FeesMustFall protests or while students were sitting for annual examinations. A second limitation is that data were collected using only naïve sketches. Therefore, participants had limited opportunity to revise and reflect on statements as would have been the case if qualitative interviews had been conducted. A third limitation is that participants (225 out of 452 invited to participate) may have been particularly motivated to provide data. A more holistic qualitative picture could have emerged if a more representative sample had been included in the study. Additionally, identifying the reasons why a subsection of the population who were invited to participate declined to do so could have offered greater insight into the qualitative findings.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned limitations, this study offered insight into the stressful experiences and coping efforts among first-year university students. Moreover, the study paves the way for further research that could focus on, amongst other things, developing strategies and interventions to assist students in coping with academic-related stressors. Student affairs practitioners should take the lead on developing and empirically evaluating such initiatives. Research should also explore the stressors that students experience in the post #FeesMustFall period. Further studies could delve into the role that cultural differences and grit play in coping with stress. Lastly, students' decisions of not making use of student affairs services and the impact of this on the experience of stress and subsequent coping behaviours should be considered.

Stress is a ubiquitous factor in student life. As student affairs practitioners we have a responsibility to not only empirically explore students' perspectives on stress. Rather, practical application of lessons learned should guide the way forward as we assist students in developing the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to flourish in the 21st century.

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