

Results Of Experimental Program For Studying The Coping Behavior Peculiarities In Higher Education Students

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Abstract: *The article reflects the results of an experimental study of the specifics of coping behavior of university students. Considering coping behavior as a special purposeful socially-oriented behavior of a person that ensures his productivity, health and, both psychological and social, well-being, we believe that the formation of the experience of coping behavior is a prolonged process and is carried out throughout a person's life. We determined the study of the specifics of coping behavior among students of a higher educational institution as the target guidelines of our research. Relying on theoretical and methodological provisions in the field of personality psychology, psychology of coping behavior, as well as the theory of stress, we have designed a diagnostic program that included the method of scientific observation, as well as a system of test methods. Our pilot study showed that the complex application of the diagnostic program developed by us makes it possible not only to study the specifics of coping behavior of students within the framework of their educational activities, but also to determine the type of behavioral activity of respondents, the characteristics of their behavior in emotionally stressful situations, and also to determine the main reasons stimulating the onset of stress.*

Keywords: *coping behavior, defense mechanisms, coping strategies, coping strategies, stress.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The dynamism, complexity and contradictoriness of modern life objectively influence on the emergence of situations that disrupt the usual course of life and work of a person. At the same time, the experience of changing circumstances often changes both the person's perception of the world around him and his place in it, up to significant violations of the adaptive capabilities of the subject [3], [9], [18], [29], [33], [40], [44], [46], [47]. These negative phenomena, in order to feel safe and remain adaptive to these difficult conditions of the surrounding reality, require from a person increased both psychological and physiological resources and capabilities. It is no coincidence that one of the topical and actively developed by a whole range of human sciences is the problem of coping behavior [1], [21], [25], [29], [34], [46].

Our analysis made it possible to identify a number of areas within which developments in the field of coping behavior problems are being carried out: dependence of the choice of coping behavior forms on the subject's age [11], [13], [24], gender specificity of coping behavior [6], coping behavior in the structure of the subject's adaptive capabilities [9], [21], [22], the specifics of the manifestation of coping behavior by people who find themselves in difficult life situations [2], [17], [18], [25], [30], ethno and multicultural features of coping behavior [4], [22], and some others.

Of particular interest for modern researchers is the study of the specifics of coping behavior among university students [7], [8], [11], [42]. And this interest is objectively justified. As noted by E.A. Vertyagina and E.E. Novikova, "in modern conditions, education in higher educational institutions <...> is accompanied by a high level of psychophysiological loads <...> increasing during the period of passing tests and exams" [8, p. 151].

At the same time, as practice shows (including our own long-term practice of working with students), exam session loads are not the only reason for increasing the workloads for students. Many modern students have difficulties associated with a low level of educational activity, lack of psychological and personal readiness for higher education, insufficient development of volitional and motivational spheres, they are not able and are not ready to establish effective relationships both with their peers and with adults (and parents, and teachers). The objective consequence of all these negative and difficult life situations are somatic illnesses, depression, loss of motivation for learning, etc. In our opinion, the timely identification of the psychological mechanisms of coping behavior, as well as the conditions for its development in students, will allow to avoid the above listed problems, and, thereby, to improve the quality of education at the university. The purpose of our research is to reflect the results of an empirical approach to understanding the problem of coping behavior.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The ever-increasing need of modern society for personally and socially mature, competent specialists "capable of working effectively and developing in a high-tech competitive world" [44, p. 316], objectively determines the growth of scientists' interest both in the study of patterns, conditions, factors and mechanisms for the full development of each individual, and in the understanding of the resources of effective both personal and professional development of each subject.

As one of such resources and personality potentials, researchers single out behavioral experience (the experience of coping behavior), which allows a person, regardless of the life situation, to effectively carry out his life activities [5], [18], [19], [20], [33], [38], [46].

The retrospective analysis of research carried out by us allows us to say that the first works in the field of coping behavior appear in the first half of the twentieth century, as part of the development of technologies for mastering the mechanisms of protection of the “Ego”, ensuring the fastest and most effective adaptation of a person to the constantly changing environment [45].

An active study of coping behavior in the aspect of optimizing human adaptive capabilities continues up to the present day [9], [18], [29], [35], [36], [42], [46]. At the same time, considering the adaptation processes from the standpoint of overcoming stressful influences, the researchers proposed to use a number of synonymous terms: “coping”, “coping strategies” and “strategies to overcome stress”.

We see the tight connection between these phenomena and, having considered the approaches of scientists to the interpretation of the following concepts of the coping behaviour: as “a component of a person’s life-meaning strategy”, E.V. Kartavshchikova [13, p. 35]; as “the subject's conscious organization of his behavior, focused on overcoming difficulties” [33] (E.A. Sergienko); as “a special type of social behavior of a person that ensures or destroys his health and well-being” [18] (T.L. Kryukova), focused on helping the subject to overcome stress or difficult life situations through controlled actions; as a “purposeful social behavior that allows the subject to cope with a difficult life situation or stress adequately to his personal characteristics and through deliberate action strategies” [31] (O.B. Podobina); as a form of behavior reflecting “the readiness of an individual to solve life problems <...> behavior aimed at adapting to circumstances” [25, p.275] (I.G. Malkina-Pykh). From the point of view of A.A. Aleksapolsky and M.A. Kholodnaya, “coping behavior is a repertoire (set) of coping strategies that a person consciously and flexibly uses in order to maintain the quality of life necessary for him” [39, p. 61].

Summarizing these positions of scientists, we consider it possible to conclude that both the term “coping” and “coping strategies” and “strategies for coping with stress” denote the readiness and ability of the subject in a given situation to implement a form of behavior that would allow to solve as effectively as possible the problems that a person has in his life and work. At the same time, as S.O. Shchelina notes, “a person does not just adapt to a situation <...> he has formed the ability to find and use specific means to overcome stress (usually emotional)” [42, p. 318].

It is no coincidence that the problem of coping behavior is very actively studied by modern scientists in the context of optimization of the subject’s activity. As a result of the research, scientists have found that the success / failure of a person and their activities affect the nature of overcoming difficulties arising in the framework of the activity being implemented. So,

- research by T.O. Gordeeva, E.N. Osin and E.I. Rasskazova proved the connection between effective support (in a situation of its need) of third grade students and an increase in their school success, as well as an increase in social competence in the fourth and fifth grades [32],

- a similar conclusion is made by E.A. Shepeleva, discovering in the framework of the study that an active coping strategy has a positive effect on academic performance and subjective school well-being [41],

- the influence of emotions on the efficiency of activity has been proven by the research of S. Brown and his colleagues [44],

- research by E.V. Bityutskoi [4], K. Muzdybaeva [26], S.A. Khazova [38] and some other researchers proved the relationship between the negative attitude of students to learning activities and the level of their stress resistance;

- a very interesting study of coping behavior as a resource of personal and professional development of students was carried out by S.O. Shchelina [42]. Paying

attention to the discrepancy between the need to organize personal developmental vocational education at the university and traditional educational technologies, as well as the reproductive nature of traditional learning technologies, the author notes that it is the experience of coping behavior that can become a necessary resource for optimal personal and professional development of students.

Generalizing the positions of scientists on the problem of coping behavior, we tend to understand this phenomenon as a special purposeful social behavior of the subject that ensures his productivity, health and well-being and allows rationally resolving conflict and even crisis situations using not only specific control actions, but also optimal change as situation, and their attitude to it. In other words, coping behavior always presupposes active interaction of the subject with the emerging life situation and, as a result of this interaction, its resolution.

Our research is also focused on studying coping behavior of university students.

Considering coping as the most important condition for the successful adaptation of the subject to the surrounding reality, we proceed from the fact that each person in the process of life and activity is faced with many difficult situations, circumstances, events, the experience of which leaves a mark, both on the person's perception of the world around him, and his place this world and even herself (personal capabilities and characteristics).

At the same time, it is the accumulation of life experience (even not always positive) that prompts each person to make an effort aimed at creating a special style of behavior that helps to effectively cope with emerging difficulties and problems.

As objectively proved by scientists, the process of accumulating experience, including the experience of coping behavior, is carried out throughout a person's life. At the same time, certain age stages are the most sensitive to the formation of effective behavioral coping strategies.

One of such age periods is the period of adolescence, which, according to many researchers, is a period of active transition from "dependent childhood" to an independent and responsible adulthood, which cannot but cause anxiety and concern in young people for themselves, their lives and the success of their activities [10], [16], [27].

According to S.K. Nartova-Bochaver [28], the social development of young people should be considered as a stressful situation, entailing a large number of experiences. As the research results of this scientist have shown, the implementation of the ability to easily and quickly cope with problems is not possible for all young men and women. At the same time, crisis situations experienced by young men and women directly affect both their mental and somatic health and well-being and objectively require the search for solutions.

Summing up the above, we can say that stress is an inseparable part of every student's life. By studying the psychological patterns, mechanisms and specifics of the development of coping behavior during adolescence, it is possible not only to avoid negative changes in the development of students, but also to increase the quality of their education.

3. METHODS

Based on theoretical and methodological provisions in the field of personality psychology ([1], [12], [23], [34]), coping psychology ([3], [19], [33], [38], [46]), as well as stress theory ([5], [48]), we have designed a diagnostic program focused on studying the specifics of coping behavior in students of a higher educational institution, which included:

1. Method of scientific observation, focused on studying the strategies of respondents' behavior. As the basic parameters of the assessment, we identified: the nature and directional social support provided to others, methods of coping behavior, the type of

coping strategy, coping strategies, reaction style and some others. We believe that a detailed analysis of these parameters will allow us to identify:

- what method of coping behavior is most often used by students - problem solving, seeking social support or avoidance;
- what type of coping strategy (active actions, an indirect form of coping, or coping without emotions) is characteristic of the majority of respondents;
- which strategy: problem-oriented or subject-oriented, emotionally-focused or problem-focused is typical for the majority of students who took part in our study.

2. Questionnaire “Methods of coping behavior” (authors R. Lazarus, S. Folkman, adapted by T. L. Kryukova [19]). Understanding coping as the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts of a person, which he orients on the effective management of the special requirements of the external and internal environment, overcoming difficulties that arise, finding ways to reduce negative consequences, or avoiding the problem, scientists believe that the developed questionnaire will allow studying coping–mechanisms of adaptive behavior in a variety of areas of mental activity. We used this questionnaire to study the mechanisms of students’ behavior in stressful situations related to educational activities.

3. Modified and adapted by us for the peculiarities of the life of university students (namely, their educational activities) methodology “Diagnostics of strategies of behavioral activity in stressful conditions” (author N.P. Fetiskin [37]). This technique is used to determine the type of behavioral activity under stressful conditions for the subject. Knowledge of the most frequently used behavioral strategies can help to consciously change them in order to optimize the process of responding to certain stimuli and influences.

4. Test for educational stress (Y.V. Shcherbatykh), used by us to study the causes of educational stress that have the greatest impact on university students, depending on the course of study. As part of the implementation of this test, respondents are asked to answer seven questions of different content, such as “Evaluate the contribution of personal problems to the overall picture of stress”, “Determine the change in the level of personal persistent stress over the last three months of study”, “Choose your typical stress relief techniques” and etc. When making a choice, the respondents need to rank it from the most-preferred to the minimum-preferred [43].

These techniques allow studying the basic coping strategies of students that are used by them in educational activities; to determine the type of behavioral activity, which will further assess the nature of the respondents’ behavior in emotionally stressful situations; and to find out the causes of stress among students when studying at a university.

The respondents in our study were 70 students of the Nizhny Novgorod State Pedagogical University aged 18 to 23 years old, who were represented by two samples of respondents:

- 1st sample–35 people aged 18-19, first courses (hereinafter the first study group);
- 2nd sample–35 people aged 22-23, the last courses of study (second study group).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We will carry out the analysis and description of the results of the pilot study obtained by us in the same logic and sequence as in the research program presented above. Generalization of the observation results allowed us to highlight the following differences in the behavior of the respondents of the first and second groups:

1. “Problem solving” as a way of coping behavior was used by 36.1% of students in the first group, while in the second group it was 41% of the respondents. This method of coping behavior consists in the emotional stability of the respondents in solving problematic issues, and, as a consequence, in a more rational approach to resolving a problem situation. It

should also be noted that "problem solving" is an active coping behavior that uses all possible human resources to overcome difficulties.

2. The respondents of the second group not only consulted each other to a lesser extent, but also less often asked for help from the experimenter. The percentage of using such coping behavior as "seeking social support" was only 6%. The respondents of the first experimental group used this method of coping behavior more often—14%. These respondents reacted quite emotionally to the questions, actively discussed their answers, shared stories from life that, in their opinion, resembled the stated topics in the methods; when difficulties arose in the formulation of questions, they immediately asked many clarifying questions.

3. The method of coping behavior "Avoidance", characterized by the desire to avoid solving problems, to avoid contact with the surrounding reality, was used only by 11% of the respondents in the first experimental group. In the behavior of the respondents of the second experimental group, this form of behavior was not recorded by us.

4. If we analyze the quality of the behavioral strategies used by the respondents who took part in our study, then we consider it possible to conclude that the majority of respondents used direct active actions. At the same time, the choice of emotionally focused coping is leading among students of the first experimental group (64%). The respondents of the second experimental group are inclined to use the problem-oriented style of reaction in a difficult situation (56%).

5. The style of reaction is also different. The subject-oriented style, characterized by the desire to forget about the problem that has arisen, not to take any action to eliminate it, is used by 44% of the respondents in the first group. The respondents of the second group strive for an independent analysis of what happened and use a rational method of solving problems: it is chosen by 74% of the respondents in this group.

The implementation of the questionnaire "*Ways of coping behavior*" (authors R. Lazarus, S. Folkman, adapted by T. L. Kryukova [19]), indicates that for the respondents of the first group of respondents the preferred coping strategy is a positive overestimation (50% of respondents). We believe that the ability to overcome negative experiences using the method of positive rethinking of the problem, which is characteristic of these respondents, can also be considered as a kind of stimulus necessary, among other things, for personal growth and development. 36% of the respondents in the first sample used the "escape-avoidance" strategy, characterized by the effort that a person orients towards avoiding the problem, which may also be related to the age specifics of these respondents: first-year students are positively disposed towards the future and tend to downplay the importance of emerging problems, considering that they are far-fetched and everything can be overcome.

The respondents of the second group are inclined to overcome problems by analyzing the situation, thinking over all possible solutions to the problem and planning their actions only based on the data received. This is evidenced by the fact that 65% of the respondents in this group choose the strategy of "planning a solution to the problem" as their preferred strategy. These are also chosen by the respondents and such strategies as "taking responsibility"—59% of the respondents and "self-control"—56% of the respondents.

In order to establish reliable differences, within the framework of the analysis of the data obtained by us through the implementation of this technique, we used the Student's t-test, which objectively proved the presence of significant differences on such scales as coping strategy, confrontation ($t_{Emp} = 2.9$), acceptance of responsibility ($t_{Emp} = 3$), planning a solution to the problem ($t_{Emp} = 3.4$) and positive reevaluation ($t_{Emp} = 2.8$).

The data we have obtained allow us to say that coping strategies tend to change with age. The older the student, the more often he applies a rational way of solving problem situations, as a result of which the choice of coping strategy is based not on emotional

manifestations and dependent position, but on taking responsibility for his actions, on the development of self-control.

The data obtained by us as a result of the implementation of the methodology “Diagnostics of *strategies of behavioral activity in stressful conditions*” N.P. Fetiskin [39]) indicate that

- type of behavioral activity A, characterized by anxiety, constant tension of forces, the need for a variety of impressions and excessive sensitivity, is demonstrated by 19.4% of respondents in the first group and in 11.8% of respondents in the second experimental group;

- type of behavioral activity A1, for which anxiety controlled by the will, lack of ambition, activity and emotionality are typical for 47.2% of respondents in the first group and 29.4% of respondents in the second experimental group;

- type of behavioral activity B, characterized by lack of initiative, isolation and indifference, is recorded by us in 8.3% of respondents in the first group and in 5.9% of respondents in the second experimental group;

- type B1, characterized by poise, a tendency to carefully consider their actions and options for possible events, is typical for 11.1% of the first experimental group and 17.6% of the second experimental group, and

- type of AB, which is characterized by activity, versatility and emotional stiffness, we recorded in 13.8% of the first experimental group and 35.2% of the respondents in the second study group.

Summarizing the data obtained as a result of the implementation of this methodology, we can say that the ability to adapt to difficult, crisis situations is most inherent in the respondents of the second experimental group, represented by senior students of the university). Their resistance to stress is manifested through confident behavior, having a goal, and the ability to allocate their time and prioritize. The majority of the respondents in the first experimental group are distinguished by increased anxiety, emotionality, and behavioral instability.

The last methodology of our diagnostic program was the *test for educational stress* by Yu.V. Shcherbatykh [43]. After analyzing the data obtained as a result of testing, we conclude that

- the greatest stress for university students is caused by a large academic load (78% of respondents from the first group and 62% from the second).

- the influence of strict teachers, as a stress factor is named by 71% of the first group and 51% of the second.

- 49% of the respondents of the first group and 51% of the second named too serious attitude to the educational process as the cause of stress.

- 69% of the respondents of the second group and 61% of the first gave high points to such a cause of stress as “Fear of the future.”

- 74% of respondents in the first group and 44% of the second gave high scores to such a stress factor as “Inability to properly manage limited finances.”

- 81% of the respondents in the first experimental group and 56% of the second chose “Irregular eating” as a cause of stress.

Also, based on a detailed analysis of experimental data, we will be able to develop a program of psychological support for the process of the formation of coping behavior in university students, the use of which in the wide practice of working with students will not only contribute to the formation of their experience of coping behavior, but also optimize the process of their learning.

5. CONCLUSION

Our research allows us to conclude that the problem of coping behavior and increasing stress resistance, as a personality trait, has been and remains one of the urgent problems of psychology. Our development and implementation of a diagnostic program in the framework of the experimental study showed that the respondents who took part in our study, regardless of their course of study, are inherent in one or another mode of coping behavior. As stress factors that have a serious impact on the feelings of young people and their further actions, most of the respondents call “fear of the future”, which can be explained by the lack of confidence in the correctness of professional choice, lack of ability to allocate time, organize their life and set priorities, some emotional instability, uncertainty about the future.

We also conclude that the causes of stress are always individual in nature. For some, the stress will be the workload, when others can easily cope with it and worry about the lack of time to communicate with loved ones.

Considering that coping as a structural component of a personality is a mobile characteristic and changing in the process of a person's life and activity, based on the results of our research, we conclude that the study of issues related to the search for mechanisms to optimize the process of developing coping behavior is of particular relevance. We believe that the development of a program of psychological support for the development of coping behavior will help to make the process of developing coping behavior more effective.

We define the development of such a program for university students as the prospect of our subsequent research.

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