

The Mediating Role of Coping Styles on Psychological Functioning and Well-being of College Students

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intricate relationships between psychological functioning (depression, stress, and anxiety), coping styles (problem-focused and emotion-focused), and SPIRE Well-Being (Spiritual, Physical, Intellectual, Relational, and Emotional). It emphasizes the mediating role of coping styles in the connection between psychological functioning and well-being. Data were collected from 353 students at a private university using standardized (DASS-21 and Revised Brief-COPE) and self-created (SWIS) questionnaires. The quantitative analysis revealed that depression significantly impacts SPIRE Well-Being ($\beta = -0.235$, $p < 0.001$), and this effect persists even when problem-focused coping is introduced as a mediating factor. Additionally, the study found that emotion-focused coping significantly mediates the relationship between depression and well-being ($\beta = -0.032$, $p = 0.025$). For stress, its negative impact on SPIRE Well-Being ($\beta = -0.141$, $p = 0.006$) remains significant when emotion-focused coping is considered ($\beta = -0.094$, $p = 0.041$). It was also revealed that neither problem or emotion-focused coping mediates the relationship of anxiety and well-being. The findings suggest that both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping styles partially mediate the relationship between depression and well-being, while emotion-focused coping also partially mediates the relationship between stress and well-being. By understanding how coping styles influence well-being, universities and mental health professionals can develop targeted interventions such as workshops, lectures and group dynamics focusing to help students properly use coping styles and improvement of well-being.

Keywords: Anxiety, Coping Style, Depression, Stress, Well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Well-being is an essential part of college life as it significantly impacts students' personal growth, academic performance, and overall experience. Healthy adjustment and development during college are crucial to fostering students' success, enabling them to build prosperous careers and fulfilling lives (Rand et al., 2020). However, the college environment also exposes students to numerous academic and non-academic pressures. Mental health disturbances such as depression, anxiety, and stress are common and often disrupt the development of their well-being (Alibudbud, 2021; Puyat et al., 2021).

In the Philippines, poor well-being, along with rising levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, has become a growing concern among college students (Tomacruz, 2018). Cultural and societal factors significantly influence this trend. According to Alejandria et al. (2023),

intergenerational misunderstandings about mental health, particularly within families, often heighten the stress levels of students. In traditional and religious households, mental health issues are frequently stigmatized, further discouraging students from seeking help. This cultural framework deeply shapes how Filipino students perceive and manage their mental health and well-being. Consequently, these influences contribute to the ongoing mental health challenges experienced by many Filipino college students. These increasing mental health challenges not only affect their academic performance but also hinder their ability to develop the emotional resilience needed to navigate this stage of life. Despite growing awareness of these issues, there remains a lack of comprehensive strategies to address the psychological needs of students, leading to a critical gap in support systems. These calls for a diverse strategy from different social institutions like the family, the school, policy-making agencies, and even the student themselves to address this problem (Tomacruz, 2018).

Hence, these issues sparked research endeavors in finding personal psychological resources that may act as buffers against the pressures that are a part of the university environment. These psychological resources or tools, if studied deeply, would control potential threats and improve stress response leading to a more favorable psychological adjustment of college students (Leiva-Bianchi et al., 2012). One of the most widely used and studied psychological resources, which proves to be an effective buffer against depression, stress, and anxiety, and can improve well-being, are coping styles. However, few studies explored the impact of coping styles to the relationship of psychological functioning (depression, stress, and anxiety) and well-being.

Understanding coping styles and their relationship with psychological functioning and well-being is crucial in addressing the mental health challenges faced by students. Identifying how students use coping strategies when dealing with depression, stress, and anxiety, and assessing the level of their well-being, can provide valuable insights for designing better interventions. Without this understanding, many students may continue to struggle with poor mental health, leading to long-term negative outcomes and poor well-being. Therefore, this study aims to explore the mediating role of coping style to the relationship of psychological functioning and well-being of college students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review aims to explore the intricate dynamics of psychological functioning, coping styles, well-being and their respective sub-variables. This review will understand the nature of each variable and compare different research findings both globally and locally to support the foundation of the research.

Relationship of Well-Being and Coping Styles

Research on coping strategies and their influence on well-being among college students has produced varied results. Some studies, like Angelica et al. (2022), have shown that problem-focused coping strategies, particularly among female students, positively predict psychological well-being. These strategies, which involve planning, active problem-solving, and seeking instrumental support, seem to offer a constructive way to handle stress and maintain emotional balance. However, other research, such as Setiawan (2020), reported no

significant effect of coping strategies on subjective well-being, suggesting that coping effectiveness may vary depending on individual circumstances or measurement methods.

Despite these inconsistencies, Syaudah (2019) found that problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies predicted 12% of the variance in psychological well-being among final-year university students. This implies that while coping styles do contribute to well-being, other factors also play significant roles. During the COVID-19 pandemic, problem-focused coping emerged as especially beneficial. According to Valladolid (2021), students using problem-focused strategies experienced better academic, social, and mental well-being, while avoidant coping was linked to negative academic emotions. This finding highlights the importance of adaptive coping in challenging and anxiety-inducing situations.

Interestingly, gender differences have been noted in the use of coping strategies. For instance, planning and seeking instrumental support were more predictive of well-being in female students, whereas active coping strategies were associated with better outcomes for male students (Angelica et al., 2022). These gender-specific differences suggest that tailored interventions might be necessary to enhance well-being effectively for diverse student populations. Together, these studies underscore the complex role of coping strategies in shaping student well-being, especially under stress.

Relationship of Coping Styles to Psychological Functioning

The relationship between coping strategies and psychological functioning is multifaceted, revealing that different coping mechanisms can have varying impacts on mental health. Problem-focused coping, which involves active problem-solving and goal-oriented behavior, is generally associated with lower levels of negative mood and higher levels of positive mood and overall quality of life. For instance, Shermeyer et al. (2018) demonstrated that individuals using problem-focused engagement reported lower negative affect and higher life satisfaction. Similarly, solution-focused thinking, which includes resource activation and goal orientation, has been found to negatively correlate with depression, anxiety, and stress, while positively impacting psychological well-being (Karahan & Hamarta, 2020). This suggests that individuals who focus on solving problems and mobilizing resources are better equipped to manage stress and maintain emotional stability.

However, some research presents a more complex picture. A study by Tuasikal and Retnowati (2019) found no significant relationship between problem-focused coping and depression among first-year students, while emotion-focused coping (which involves managing emotions rather than directly addressing problems) was positively correlated with depressive symptoms. This indicates that in certain situations, focusing on emotions rather than problem-solving can be detrimental to mental health. Further supporting this, Kim et al. (2021) found that students with depression exhibited higher scores in emotion-focused coping and lower scores in problem-focused coping compared to their non-depressed peers. These findings highlight that while problem-focused strategies are often beneficial, emotion-focused coping may exacerbate negative psychological states such as depression, especially in vulnerable populations.

In summary, the literature shows that coping strategies interact differently with psychological functioning, and the effectiveness of these strategies may vary depending on individual circumstances, the nature of stressors, and the specific mental health issues involved.

Relationship of Well-being and Psychological Functioning

Research consistently shows an inverse relationship between psychological well-being and depressive symptoms, with key aspects such as autonomy, positive relationships, and purpose in life being particularly affected (Rossi et al., 2019; Yüksel & Bahadır-Yılmaz, 2019). Positive peer interactions, including student-to-student confirmation in classroom settings, have been linked to reduced depressive symptoms and improved psychological well-being, highlighting the importance of social support in academic environments (LaBelle & Johnson, 2021). Additionally, eudaimonic well-being—focused on personal fulfillment and life purpose—is strongly inversely related to depression. Studies suggest that fostering eudaimonia through interventions can help alleviate depressive symptoms (Ruini & Cesetti, 2019).

Despite this, some findings challenge the general understanding of these relationships. For example, Gharehboghlu et al. (2019) found no significant link between spiritual well-being and depression among nursing students, indicating that spiritual well-being might not universally buffer against depression. Stress is another major factor, with higher stress levels commonly linked to lower psychological well-being among college students, exacerbated by issues such as sleep problems, anxiety, and strained relationships (Malik et al., 2020; Hartson et al., 2023). However, resilience and spiritual well-being can serve as buffers, helping students manage the negative effects of stress.

Research on coping strategies and their impact on well-being among college students has yielded mixed results. Some studies show that problem-focused coping positively predicts well-being, especially for female students, while other research reports no significant effect of coping on well-being. Additionally, researchers also found that problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies only account for 12% of the variance in psychological well-being, suggesting that other factors also play a role. The relationship between coping and psychological functioning is complex, with problem-focused coping linked to lower negative mood but emotion-focused coping correlating with depressive symptoms in some students. Despite some positive findings, there is limited evidence on how coping styles mediate the relationship between psychological functioning and well-being, and the effects of problem-focused coping on stress are not well-established. Additionally, cultural and gender differences highlight the need for further exploration of how coping styles vary across diverse populations.

METHODS

Research Design

The researcher utilized a quantitative research design. There are several important points why quantitative research design was used in this study. One of which is gathering and evaluating numerical data is the focus. It uses a methodical, structured methodology that enables replication and ensures objectivity. By minimizing biases and subjective interpretations, this strategy produces conclusions that are more trustworthy and legitimate (Brannen, 2017). Furthermore, the goal of quantitative research is to produce findings that may be used in a wider range of situations or populations. One can draw conclusions about the target population using representative samples and statistical methods, giving you a foundation for generalizing results. The current study added to the present pool of knowledge regarding the relationship of Psychological Functioning, Coping Style, and Well-being of college students

and its implication on the said population. Another reason and benefit of using this research design is that the quantification of variables is made possible by the measurable data that quantitative research offers (Nardi, 2018). This makes it possible for researchers to carry out statistical analysis, spot trends, establish correlations, and make precise forecasts. The precision and rigor of the investigation are improved using statistical metrics.

Population Sampling

The research study was conducted among the Filipino college students ages 19-24 at Adventist University of the Philippines. For the pilot study, a total of 32 students from various colleges of the university were selected and were not included in the final data. After reliability testing, the researcher used cluster random sampling and a total of 353 students from different colleges of the university was gathered.

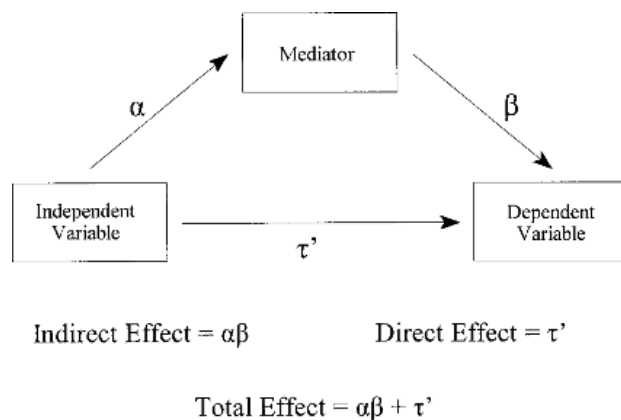
Data Collection

To measure the variables of this study, the researcher utilized three questionnaires namely, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) (Lovibond; Lovibond, 1995), Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory (Brief-COPE) (Carver, 1997), and SPIRE Well-Being Inventory Scale (SWIS). The research fully adapted DASS-21, semi-adapted Brief-COPE, and created SWIS. Prior to the actual data gathering, a letter was sent to the college deans of the university. After securing their permission, the researcher contacted faculty members from each college to conduct data gathering. Once the targeted classes were identified, the researcher gave a brief orientation and introduction about the nature and purpose of the study. Informed consent, DASS-21, BRIEF-COPE, and SWIS questionnaires that were stapled together were distributed to the whole class. Those who chose not to participate in the study were requested to return the paper. After filling out the informed consent and answering the questionnaire, the submitted questionnaires were checked individually by the researchers to see discrepancies. If an item was left blank, it was returned to the student for completion.

Data Analysis

Encoded data was given to the statistician for statistical treatment and analysis using SPSS and/or JAMOV software programs. Mediation analysis was used to test the mediating power of coping styles to the relationship between psychological functioning and well-being.

This type of analysis is used to assess the relative magnitude of different pathways and mechanisms by which an exposure may affect an outcome (VanderWeele, 2016).



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

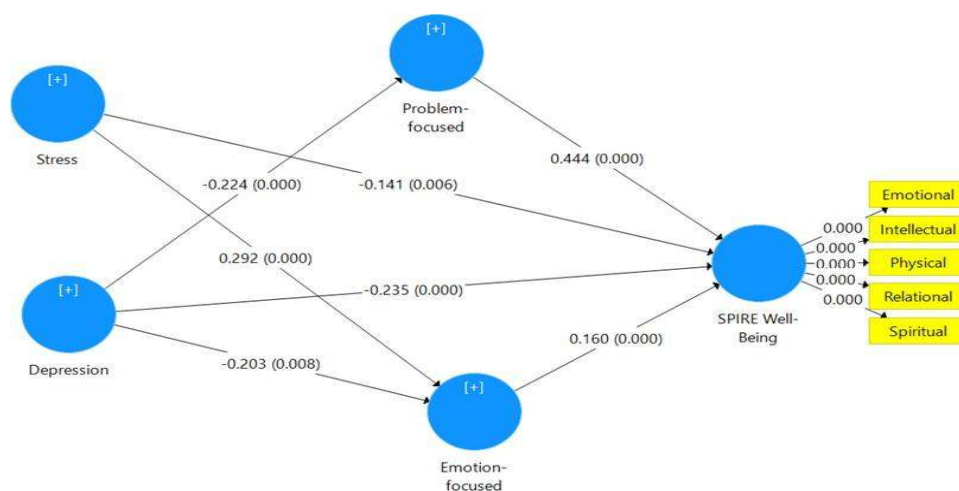


Figure 1. The Final Hypothesized Model

Figure 1 presents the hypothesized model, involving all the variables in the study. The model revealed path coefficients for Depression to Problem and Emotion-Focused Coping to SPIRE Well-being and Stress to Emotion-Focused to SPIRE Well-Being. Interestingly, anxiety was not included in the final model. This suggests that other factors other than problem and emotion-focused coping can mediate the relationship of anxiety symptoms and well-being. Discussion of path coefficients is discussed below.

Table 1
*Mediating Effect of Coping Style in the Relationship between Psychological Functioning
 and SPIRE Well-being*

Path Name	Total Effect			Direct Effect			Indirect Effect		
	Coeff.	t	p-value	Coeff.	t	p-value	Coeff.	t	p-value
D→PF→WB	-0.366	6.55	<0.001	-0.235	4.19	<0.001	-0.099	3.72	<0.001
D→EF→WB	-0.366	6.55	<0.001	-0.235	4.19	<0.001	-0.032	1.95	0.025
S→EF→WB	-0.094	1.73	0.041	-0.141	2.51	0.006	0.047	2.52	0.006

Note: p-values reported as <0.001 indicate values less than 0.001; Coeff. = Coefficient; D= Depression; S= Stress; PF= Problem-Focused Coping; EF= Emotion-Focused; WB= Well-being.

Mediation analysis was performed to assess the mediating effect of coping styles in the relationship between psychological functioning (Depression, Stress, and Anxiety) and SPIRE Well-Being. The results revealed that the effect of Depression on SPIRE Well-Being was significant ($\beta = -0.235$, $t = 4.194$, $p = <0.001$). With the inclusion of the mediating variable Problem-focused coping, the influence of Depression to SPIRE Well-Being remained significant ($\beta = -0.235$, $t = 4.194$, $p = <0.001$). The indirect effect of Depression on SPIRE Well-Being through Problem focused coping was also found significant ($\beta = -0.099$, $t = 3.728$, $p = <0.001$). The analysis shows that the relationship between Depression and SPIRE Well-being is partially mediated by Problem-Focused Coping. This implies that higher levels of Depression will prevent the use of Problem-Focused coping which then exacerbates the Well-Being of college students.

These findings support existing literature about the dynamics of Depression, Well-Being, and Problem-Focused Coping. For instance, Liu et al. (2019) demonstrated a robust inverse relationship between depression and well-being, emphasizing that higher levels of depression are linked to significantly lower well-being scores. Furthermore, placing problem-focused coping in the picture, Chung et al. (2020) found that individuals who engaged in problem-focused coping reported better mental health outcomes and higher levels of well-being, even when experiencing high levels of depression. Similarly, a study by Mahmoud et al. (2021) reported that coping strategies significantly mediated the relationship between depression and quality of life in patients with chronic illness, highlighting the role of problem-focused coping in enhancing overall well-being despite depressive symptoms. These studies, among others, emphasize the critical role of problem-focused coping in mediating the relationship between depression and well-being.

On the other hand, with the inclusion of mediating variable Emotion-focused coping, the indirect effect of Depression on SPIRE Well-Being through Emotion-focused coping was

also found significant ($\beta = -0.032$, $t = 1.955$, $p = 0.025$). This finding also shows that the relationship between Depression and SPIRE Well-being is partially mediated by Emotion-Focused Coping. This implies that higher levels of Depression will prevent the use of Emotion-Focused coping which then exacerbates the Well-Being of college students. Although the same implication can be said for the inclusion of Problem and Emotion-Focused Coping, the use of Problem-Focused mitigates more the effects of Depression to Well-being. A study by Szkody et al. (2020) showed that emotion-focused coping was associated with better psychological outcomes and higher well-being among college students experiencing depression and anxiety. This suggests that emotion-focused strategies can buffer some of the negative impacts of depressive symptoms.

Another path from Mediation analysis revealed that the effect of Stress on SPIRE Well-Being was significant ($\beta = -0.141$, $t = 2.518$, $p = 0.006$). With the inclusion of the mediating variable Emotion-Focused coping, the influence of Stress to SPIRE Well-Being remained significant ($\beta = -0.094$, $t = 1.739$, $p = 0.041$). The indirect effect of Stress on SPIRE Well-Being through Emotion-Focused coping was also found significant ($\beta = 0.047$, $t = 2.529$, $p = 0.006$). This implies that the higher level of stress can lead to higher use of Emotion-Focused coping which then positively influences the Well-being of college students. The analysis showed that the relationship between Stress and SPIRE Well-being is partially mediated by Problem-Focused Coping. Interestingly, the analysis also revealed that only the path of Stress to Emotion-Focused appeared and not Stress to Problem-Focused Coping.

Ahmed et al. (2019) found that emotion-focused coping strategies partially mediated the relationship between academic stress and psychological well-being among college students. This indicates that managing emotional responses can help mitigate the negative effects of stress. Furthermore, a study by Panayiotou et al. (2021) demonstrated that emotion-focused coping mediated the relationship between emotional distress and quality of life in college students. This study highlights how effective emotion management can enhance well-being despite significant stressors.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, LIMITATIONS, and SUGGESTIONS

The current research study aimed to understand the mediating power of coping styles (problem-focused and emotion-focused) to the relationship of psychological functioning (depression, stress, and anxiety) and well-being (Spiritual, Physical, Intellectual, Relational, Emotional) of college students in the Philippines. Using quantitative methods, statistical analysis provided intricate interaction of the variables included in the study. However, the population sample of the present study should be increased both in number and scope so that better generalizability of the variables can be discovered.

The mediation analysis revealed that both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping partially mediate the relationship between depression and well-being. For depression, problem-focused coping showed a significant indirect effect on well-being, suggesting that higher levels of depression hinder the use of this coping style, which in turn exacerbates well-being. Similarly, emotion-focused coping also had a significant indirect effect, though problem-focused coping showed a stronger mitigation of depression's negative impact on well-being. These findings align with studies showing problem-focused coping is linked to better mental health outcomes and higher well-being.

Regarding stress, emotion-focused coping was a significant mediator, where higher stress levels led to increased use of this coping style, positively influencing well-being. However, no significant link was found between stress and problem-focused coping. These results indicate that while problem-focused coping is crucial in managing depression, emotion-focused strategies play a larger role in mitigating the impact of stress on well-being.

Overall, the study highlights the nuanced roles of different coping strategies in managing psychological challenges and promoting well-being among students. However, further exploration is needed to fully understand how these coping styles interact with various stressors and psychological states. By acknowledging and understanding these interrelated findings, educational institutions can focus on programs and services mitigating Depression, Stress, and Anxiety and improvement of both Problem-Focused and Emotion-Focused Coping Styles.

Based on the findings, educational institutions should implement a multifaceted approach to enhance student well-being by addressing depression, stress, and anxiety, while also strengthening both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping skills. One of the primary steps is to offer comprehensive mental health support services, including counseling that emphasizes problem-solving techniques and emotional regulation strategies. Workshops and group sessions on stress management and coping skills development can provide students with practical tools to tackle academic and personal pressures.

Additionally, interventions tailored to combat depression should prioritize the development of problem-focused coping skills, as these have been shown to significantly mitigate depressive symptoms. Cognitive-behavioral interventions and solution-focused therapies can help students manage depression more effectively by teaching them goal setting, active problem-solving, and how to utilize available resources. At the same time, emotion-focused coping strategies are crucial for managing stress. Universities can offer workshops that focus on emotional regulation, mindfulness practices, and self-care techniques to help students better manage their stress responses.

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