

# Relationship between Psychological Distress, Coping Strategies and Adjustment to University Life among University Freshmen

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## Abstract

**Background:** Attending a university for the first time can be a stressful experience for many college or university freshmen. They are often confronted with a variety of new personal and interpersonal challenges and failing to meet these challenges and demands has become the most common reason for undergraduates withdrawing from university.

**Objective:** This study was to investigate the relationship between psychological distress, coping strategies and adjustment to university life among university freshmen.

**Study type settings and duration:** A cross sectional study, conducted among Bachelor of Science (BS) freshmen from various universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi in 2016.

**Methodology:** The sample of 300 B.S freshmen including both men and women were gathered through convenient sampling technique from various universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Three (Adjustment scale, Depression, Anxiety and Stress scale & Brief Cope) scales were used to assess the variable of study. Descriptive statistic and Pearson Product Moment Correlation were used to analyze the data.

**Results:** Findings showed that social adjustment, academic adjustment, institutional adjustment, personal adjustment and total adjustment were significantly negatively correlated with psychological distress and were positively correlated with problem focused coping and with overall coping. There was no relationship found between personal adjustment and depression.

**Conclusion:** It is concluded that overall adjustment significantly negatively related to psychological distress (Depression, Anxiety & Stress) among university freshmen. On the other hand adjustment to university life significantly positively related to overall coping and problem focused coping strategies.

**Key words:** University freshmen, coping, adjustment and psychological distress.

## Introduction

Adjustment is the psychological process of adapting to, coping with, and managing the problems, challenges, and demands of everyday life. Many researchers such as Abdullah, et.al, in 2009<sup>1</sup> proved that problems of adjustment initiated most commonly during first academic year of

students. The adjustment is a difficult and multidimensional process which requires many competencies to properly integrate with the environment such as quality and quantity of studies, accommodation with new teachers and classmates, which may cause psychological, social and academic difficulties and problems. Freshmen face all new things in a university which is stressful for them, as they have to deal with new fellows, professors, staff members, administration - even entire environment is changed for freshmen; they have to follow new time table, different educational formats, and also exhibit different social relationships. Their hopes and expectations are also affected by the adjustment process. This poses a threat for students and they have to cope with it. If they fail to cope with these problems, it will cause psychological distress and low level of adjustment. In this scenario, coping strategies seem helpful to reduce psychological distress and enhance their

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SRB conceptualized the project and performed the statistical analysis along with the drafting, revision & writing of manuscript. TE did the data collection and literature search.

adjustment. Adaptation to university life is a major change for young adults, as they have to deal with new environment.<sup>2</sup>

People affected by psychological distress are at an increased risk of poorer general health, morbidity and mortality.<sup>3</sup> Globally, many studies have reported high rates of mental health problems among undergraduate students aged 18-24 years.<sup>4-6</sup> For instance, in a sample of 1557 Irish university students, the prevalence of psychological distress was found to be 41.9%.<sup>7</sup> Psychological distress is a broad concept that comprises, besides mental disorders, other mental health problems that may not fall into the typical diagnostic criteria. Psychological distress causes lack of adjustment and failure in the spheres of career life and it is negatively correlated with adjustment.<sup>8</sup>

Further, coping leads to a student towards a life of dealing with academic life or it provides ability to a student to alter their situation or helps to maintain the power of struggling and boost up his motivation which helps in better adjustment. A number of researches describe relationship between these variables (psychological distress, adjustment and coping). According to Leong Bonz and Zachar<sup>9</sup> coping is the predictor of adjustment or adaptation. Folkman and Lazarus<sup>10</sup> investigated the role of dispositional coping and strategies in the college adjustment and found that coping has positive relationship with adjustment. It was found that there was positive relationship between problem focused coping and adjustment, and negative correlation was found between emotional focused coping and adjustment.<sup>11</sup> Investigations have shown that problem focused coping plays a vital role in change of a threatening situation.<sup>12</sup> Abdullah et al<sup>13</sup> found coping is positively related to adjustment. There are many factors contributing to maintaining or continuing the adjustment process as positive psychological health and people's styles of coping. So if a person fails to cope with adjustment problems they face psychological disturbance, and then this compromise in mental health further causes lack of adjustment. Coping strategies, as problem focused coping, help in altering the problematic situation.<sup>11,13</sup>

The general observation of Pakistani culture reveals that most of the problems are same as faced by other students in the prior research studies e.g., students do not have enough money for buying notes for their semester, lack of motivation, interactional problems (with teachers and class fellows) and difficulties in academics. All these problems jointly affect the adjustment process.<sup>14</sup> In Pakistan, 16% prevalence rate of very severe mental health problems among university students

is found while 31% of university students suffer from severe mental health problems.<sup>15-16</sup> Academic workload is significant predictor of perceived stress among college students.<sup>17</sup> Many researches has been done on topics like academic performance, achievement, aptitudes of students, self-control, motivation, but university life adjustment among university freshmen has been less explored. The basic purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between psychological distress and coping with the adjustment among university students.

## Methodology

The sample was drawn from various universities of Islamabad, including both male and female students. The Vice Chancellor of the universities gave permission to conduct the study. Objectives and the nature of the research were explained to them and they were assured that the results will remain confidential and would only be used for the research purpose. The students were given a comfortable environment to complete the questionnaires. The students reviewed and signed the informed consent, a demographic sheet and three surveys. Three scales were administered. At the end, all participants were thanked for their voluntary participation

The Depression, anxiety and stress scale<sup>18</sup> is a 21 items self report measure that assesses depression (No. of items= 7), anxiety (No. of items= 7) and stress (No. of items= 7). It is a 4-point Likert type scale. The internal consistency range is .81 to .96. Test Retest Reliability of this scale ranges from .71 to .76.<sup>18</sup>

For measuring the adjustment of a student, an adjustment scale developed by Naz Kaya and Margret J. Weber.<sup>19</sup> This scale measures the four domains of a person's life; social (No. of items= 7), academic (No. of item= 6), institutional (No. of items= 7) and personal adjustment (No. of items= 8). There are total 28 items of scale. Responses consist of 7 point rating scale as (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for the adjustment scale is .71, .70, .77 and .72, respectively [alpha] = .83 and overall score on adjustment scale is 196.

Brief COPE was used to measure the coping styles. This was developed by Carver<sup>20</sup> in 1997. For person with scores falling below or against 25<sup>th</sup> percentile, it shows low use of coping styles. If scores fall between 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentile it shows moderate use of coping strategies. On the other hand, if total scores of coping scale lie against

or above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile it represents a high use of coping styles.

All ethical issues have been considered during investigation of present research. Present article is a part of MSc research thesis, which had been approved by the institutional review board (National Institute of Psychology Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad).

## Results

The Table described correlation among variables of the study. It was found that social adjustment, academic adjustment, institutional adjustment, personal adjustment and total adjustment were significantly negatively correlated with depression, anxiety and stress and are positively correlated with problem focused coping and with overall coping. There was no relationship found between personal adjustment and depression.

## Discussion

Findings of this research indicated that there was a significantly negative relationship present with all the subscales of adjustment and psychological distress (depression, anxiety and stress) but personal adjustment has no relationship with depression. Here the reason could be their age because findings suggested<sup>21</sup> that psychological and sociological factors have a significant influence on the individual on the basis of their age, so it might be possible that the young individuals were less vulnerable to depression. Another reason behind this finding might be that the sample of this study was not very diverse or the study population might have shown more psychological distress in the form of anxiety or stress rather than depression. However, overall findings are supporting the

hypothesis (this is relationship between psychological distress, coping strategies and adjustment to university life among university freshmen) that all subscales of adjustment including social, academic, institutional and total adjustment were negatively correlated with psychological distress (depression anxiety and stress) and only personal adjustment was found to have no relationship with depression. Hence lower the level of the psychological distress promoted good adjustment level.<sup>8</sup>

Further, results showed that adjustment was positively correlated to coping. Which is indicated that adjustment increase when university students use positive coping strategies. Earlier researchers found that coping strategies were the significant predictor of good adjustment.<sup>22</sup> It was also found that in the adjustment period, new students use coping strategies that help them to deal with their experience of stress and circumstances that are considered being a threat for students. Hence, the coping strategies have positive link with adjustment as people who use more coping strategies exhibit better adjustment than those using less coping strategies.<sup>17</sup>

McNamara<sup>23</sup> found that problem focused coping helps to reduce stress level and leads towards better adjustment. Problem focused coping also plays a vital role in the changing a threatening situation.<sup>13</sup> Previous studies concluded that those students who are more engaged in problem focused coping show more motivation and perform very well in their studies than those who use emotional focused coping.<sup>23-24</sup> Lazarus and Folkman<sup>10</sup> reported that problem focused coping help to alter situation in an active manner. So it can be said that those who used more problem focused coping skills or think rationally and also make decision after analyzing the situation can better adopt ways of well adjustment and exhibit less psychological distress.

**Table: Correlation between adjustment, psychological distress and coping.**

Scales	SA	AA	IA	PA	TA	D	A	S	PFC	TBC
SA	-	.437**	.413**	.312**	.718**	-.169**	-.148*	-.193**	.268**	.185**
AA		-	.457**	.259**	.660**	-.174**	-.160**	-.176**	.264**	.151**
IA			-	.417**	.715**	-.214**	-.187**	-.215**	.236**	.131*
PA				-	.664**	.003	-.044	-.014	.244**	.230**
TA					-	-.167**	-.158**	-.169**	.356**	.234**
D						-	.705**	.569**	-.050	.103
A							-	.543**	-.050	.086
S								-	.031	.196**
PFC									-	.706**
TBC										-

Note. SA = Social Adjustment, AA = Academic Adjustment, IA = Institutional Adjustment, PA= Personal Adjustment, TA = Total Adjustment, A = Anxiety, D = Depression, S = Stress, PFC = Problem focused coping, TBC = Total Brief Cope.  $p^* < .05$ ,  $p^{**} < .01$

It is concluded that psychological distress (depression, anxiety and stress) is negatively related to adjustment but overall coping and problem focused coping is positively related to adjustment. So it can be said that students who used problem focused coping strategies were well adjusted than those who use emotional/avoidant focus coping strategies. Furthermore adjustment processes go well if students use appropriate coping strategies. Usage of appropriate coping styles helps them to overcome psychological distress, and it leads them toward better adjustment and supreme level of well-being.

**Conflict of interest:** None declared.

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