

UNHEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN KARACHI

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Abstract

Academic stress is a significant challenge in higher education, often leading students to adopt coping mechanisms that are detrimental to their academic and psychological well-being. This study aimed to explore the prevalence and nature of unhealthy coping strategies used by undergraduate students to manage academic stress at a private university in Karachi. Using a descriptive, quantitative research design, data were collected from 150 male undergraduate students through a structured self-report questionnaire. The findings revealed that procrastination (65%), excessive social media use (58%), and emotional eating (52%) were the most frequently reported coping strategies, followed by smoking (40%), avoidance behaviors (38%), and limited reliance on sleeping pills (25%) and substance use (15%). Participants reported that these maladaptive strategies contributed to missed deadlines, poor concentration, and reduced academic motivation. The study concludes that undergraduate students predominantly rely on avoidance-oriented and escapist coping behaviors, which exacerbate stress rather than alleviate it. It is recommended that universities implement counseling services, stress management workshops, and awareness programs to promote healthier coping alternatives and enhance student well-being.

INTRODUCTION

University life is widely recognized as a period of significant transition and psychological adjustment. During this stage, students encounter numerous academic, social, and personal challenges that may trigger stress. Although a moderate level of stress can serve as a motivating factor, excessive or chronic stress often produces negative emotional, behavioral, and physical outcomes (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Scott & Marshall, 2015). Academic stress, in particular, has

emerged as one of the most prevalent issues affecting university students, as they face continuous pressures such as examinations, deadlines, performance expectations, and competition (Robotham & Julian, 2006; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2014).

Academic stress is commonly defined as the psychological distress experienced due to demands associated with academic performance, workload, and assessment systems (Abouserie, 1994). Students who

are unable to effectively manage such pressures often resort to coping strategies—conscious or unconscious efforts to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in stressful situations (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Coping mechanisms may be broadly classified into adaptive (problem-focused and emotion-focused) and maladaptive (avoidant, escapist, or self-destructive) strategies. While adaptive strategies promote resilience and positive adjustment, maladaptive strategies may provide temporary relief but exacerbate long-term distress (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989).

In the context of higher education, maladaptive or unhealthy coping strategies are increasingly observed among students experiencing academic stress. These include behavioral responses such as procrastination, avoidance, substance use, smoking, emotional eating, and reliance on sleeping pills (Misra & McKean, 2000; Kausar, 2010). For example, procrastination and avoidance allow students to temporarily escape academic pressure but often lead to increased anxiety and poor academic performance. Similarly, substance use and smoking are forms of escapism that can damage physical health and emotional stability (Murff, 2005). Research indicates that students who rely heavily on such maladaptive strategies report lower self-efficacy, reduced motivation, and poorer academic outcomes compared to peers who adopt constructive coping mechanisms (Talib & Zia-ur-Rehman, 2012).

The prevalence of maladaptive coping behaviors is particularly concerning in developing countries such as Pakistan, where awareness of mental health and access to counseling services remain limited (Kausar, 2010). In many cases, students lack formal guidance on stress management, leading them to adopt self-directed and often harmful coping practices. Cultural and social factors—such as stigma around mental health discussions, high parental expectations, and academic competitiveness—further discourage students from seeking professional help (Agolla & Ongori, 2009). Consequently, unhealthy coping

strategies become normalized as part of academic life, perpetuating cycles of stress, underachievement, and emotional exhaustion.

Empirical studies in South Asian contexts have revealed similar patterns. For instance, research conducted among Pakistani undergraduates found that students frequently use denial, behavioral disengagement, and venting rather than problem-solving or seeking support (Kausar, 2010). Comparable studies in India and Malaysia reported that avoidance-oriented coping predicts higher stress and lower academic performance (Sulaiman, Hassan, Sopian, & Abdullah, 2009; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2014). Despite this evidence, there remains a gap in localized research examining which specific unhealthy coping strategies are most common among undergraduate students in Karachi and how these strategies relate to academic stress.

Given the growing emphasis on student well-being and mental health in educational institutions, it is critical to identify the maladaptive coping patterns students use in response to academic demands. Understanding these strategies will help universities design targeted interventions—such as counseling services, stress management workshops, and awareness programs—to promote healthier coping mechanisms.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore the extent and nature of unhealthy coping strategies employed by undergraduate students at a private university in Karachi. It also seeks to understand how reliance on such strategies may hinder students' academic performance and emotional well-being. By identifying prevalent maladaptive coping patterns, this research contributes to a broader understanding of student mental health in Pakistan and offers insights for designing preventive and supportive academic environments.

2. Purpose of the Study

2.1 General Purpose

The general purpose of this study is to explore the unhealthy coping strategies adopted by undergraduate students in response to academic stress at a private university in Karachi. The study seeks to bring attention to the prevalence of maladaptive coping behaviors—such as procrastination, avoidance, substance use, smoking, emotional eating, and reliance on sleeping pills—that students often employ to manage study-related pressures. Understanding these behaviors will provide insight into how ineffective coping mechanisms perpetuate stress and hinder academic success.

2.2 Specific Purpose

The specific purpose of the study is to:

- Identify the most commonly used maladaptive coping strategies among undergraduate students experiencing academic stress.
- Examine the relationship between academic stress and the adoption of unhealthy coping patterns.
- Understand how the use of such coping mechanisms influences academic performance and emotional well-being.
- Provide a foundation for developing institutional interventions, such as stress management programs and counseling services, to promote healthy coping in university settings.

Statement of the Problem

This study explores how undergraduate students cope with academic stress at a private university in Karachi, with a particular focus on unhealthy coping strategies. Despite being under stress due to academic demands, many students rely on maladaptive behaviors such as smoking, procrastination, excessive use of sleeping pills, or substance use, which further hinder their well-being and academic outcomes.

3. Objectives

1. Explore the unhealthy coping strategies commonly used by students to deal with academic stress.
2. Understand how these maladaptive strategies impact student performance and well-being.
3. Highlight the need for healthier coping alternatives in the university context.

4. Research Questions

- Which unhealthy coping strategies are most commonly used by undergraduate students to manage academic stress?
- How do maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., smoking, procrastination, substance use) affect student performance?
- Why do students prefer unhealthy coping mechanisms over healthier alternatives?

5. Literature Review

5.1 Academic Stress and Coping Frameworks

Academic stress is a well-documented phenomenon in higher education, resulting from the pressure to meet academic expectations, manage workloads, and achieve high performance standards. According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) **Transactional Model of Stress and Coping**, stress arises from the perceived imbalance between environmental demands and individual resources. Within this framework, **coping** refers to the cognitive and behavioral efforts used to manage internal and external stressors (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Students employ a range of coping strategies that can either mitigate or intensify their stress responses, depending on their nature and effectiveness (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989).

5.2 Maladaptive Coping Strategies

Coping mechanisms are broadly categorized into **adaptive** (constructive) and **maladaptive** (unhealthy) forms. Adaptive strategies, such as problem-solving, seeking support, and positive reframing, help students manage stress effectively and maintain psychological well-being (Misra & McKean, 2000). In contrast, **maladaptive coping strategies**—including avoidance,

denial, procrastination, substance use, and behavioral disengagement—tend to provide short-term relief but worsen emotional distress over time (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015).

Studies have consistently demonstrated that maladaptive coping is associated with **higher levels of academic stress and poorer performance** (Murff, 2005; Talib & Zia-ur-Rehman, 2012). For instance, students who procrastinate often delay task completion as a means of escaping academic pressure, but this avoidance ultimately leads to increased workload, anxiety, and decreased productivity (Klingsieck, 2013). Similarly, reliance on **substance use or smoking** is a common but harmful attempt to self-regulate stress, leading to further health and concentration issues (Sulaiman, Hassan, Sopian, & Abdullah, 2009). Emotional coping methods, such as **overeating** or **excessive sleep**, may also serve as avoidance behaviors, momentarily distracting students from their stressors without addressing root causes (Kausar, 2010).

5.3 Coping in University Contexts

University students often face unique pressures, including academic competition, unclear expectations, and adjustment to independent living. In contexts where mental health awareness and counseling access are limited—such as in **developing countries**—students are more prone to adopt maladaptive strategies due to stigma around help-seeking (Agolla & Ongori, 2009). Kausar (2010) found that Pakistani undergraduates predominantly rely on emotion-focused and avoidance strategies rather than active problem-solving, indicating a lack of structured support systems. Similarly, Talib and Zia-ur-Rehman (2012) reported that higher stress levels in Pakistani universities were associated with denial, venting, and behavioral disengagement.

Research in other South Asian contexts reflects similar trends. Sulaiman et al. (2009) observed that Malaysian students often use denial and disengagement when faced with academic stress, while Indian studies by Nandamuri and Gowthami (2014) highlighted that excessive workload and peer comparison encourage avoidance behaviors. Misra and McKean (2000) further concluded that ineffective time management and limited coping resources exacerbate students' vulnerability to stress.

5.4 Impact of Unhealthy Coping on Performance and Well-Being

Maladaptive coping not only fails to alleviate stress but can also lead to a **cycle of poor academic performance and psychological strain** (Murff, 2005). Students using avoidance and denial tend to experience reduced concentration, procrastination, and lower GPA outcomes. Substance use and smoking, often seen as escape behaviors, can result in health issues, absenteeism, and emotional instability (Abouserie, 1994). In contrast, students employing adaptive coping strategies—such as planning and seeking support—tend to perform better academically and report higher satisfaction (Carver et al., 1989). Furthermore, maladaptive coping has been linked with **emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and depressive symptoms**, particularly among young adults navigating university life (Wong et al., 2006). In collectivist cultures like Pakistan, where academic achievement is closely tied to family expectations, the use of unhealthy coping mechanisms may also reflect internalized pressure and fear of failure (Kausar, 2010).

5.5 Research Gap

Despite the growing recognition of mental health concerns in Pakistan, limited empirical research has focused specifically on the **types and frequency of maladaptive coping strategies** used by university students in response to academic stress. Existing studies have addressed general stress levels but have not comprehensively examined unhealthy coping in the context of undergraduate education in Karachi. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by identifying commonly used maladaptive coping behaviors and analyzing their perceived effects on academic performance and well-being.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The present study employed a **descriptive, quantitative research design** to explore the unhealthy coping strategies used by undergraduate students in response to academic stress. A descriptive approach was selected to provide an accurate account of the prevalence, types, and perceived effects of maladaptive

coping behaviors without manipulating variables. This design allowed the researcher to analyze students' self-reported strategies and highlight common trends through graphical representation and frequency distribution.

6.2 Population and Sample

The **target population** consisted of undergraduate male students enrolled at a **private university in Karachi**. This group was selected because undergraduate students are at a critical stage of academic and personal development, often encountering multiple stressors that may lead to unhealthy coping responses.

A total of **150 students** participated in the study. The **sampling technique** employed was **convenience sampling**, allowing voluntary participation from accessible academic departments and years of study. This ensured diversity in academic backgrounds while maintaining feasibility.

6.3 Instrument

Data were collected using a **structured, self-administered questionnaire** developed by the researcher. The instrument comprised three sections:

1. **Demographic Information:** Age, academic year, and department.
2. **Academic Stress Assessment:** Items assessing common academic stressors (e.g., workload, assessments, deadlines).
3. **Coping Strategies Inventory:** Items identifying maladaptive coping behaviors, including **smoking, substance use, sleeping pill intake, procrastination, avoidance, emotional eating, and excessive social media use**.

Responses were recorded using a **Likert scale** ranging from *1 (Never)* to *5 (Always)*, allowing participants to indicate the frequency of each coping behavior.

6.4 Procedure

Prior to data collection, participants were briefed about the study's purpose and assured of **confidentiality and anonymity**. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. The questionnaires were distributed in classroom settings and completed on-site under supervision to ensure accuracy and completeness.

6.5 Data Analysis

Collected data were analyzed using **descriptive statistical techniques**. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to determine the most prevalent unhealthy coping strategies among students. Results were visually presented through **graphs and tables** to illustrate key trends. The analysis also examined associations between reported coping strategies and perceived academic performance.

7. Results

7.1 Demographic Profile

A total of **150 undergraduate male students** from a private university in Karachi participated in the study. The majority of participants were aged between **18 and 24 years**, representing various departments and academic years. All respondents reported experiencing some level of academic stress during their undergraduate studies.

7.2 Prevalence of Unhealthy Coping Strategies

The analysis revealed that undergraduate students frequently rely on **unhealthy coping mechanisms** to manage academic stress. The most commonly reported strategies were **procrastination, excessive use of social media, emotional eating, smoking, and avoidance behaviors**. Less commonly reported but still notable were **sleeping pill use** and **substance use**.

- **Procrastination** emerged as the **most prevalent** coping behavior, with approximately **65%** of students indicating that they often delay academic tasks as a means of managing stress.

- **Excessive social media use** was reported by 58% of respondents, suggesting a tendency to seek distraction rather than address academic challenges directly.
- **Emotional eating** was cited by 52% of participants, reflecting a behavioral response to stress and anxiety.
- **Smoking** was reported by 40%, while **avoidance behaviors** (e.g., skipping lectures, ignoring assignments) were identified by 38% of students.
- Less frequent but concerning coping mechanisms included **sleeping pill use** (25%) and **substance use** (15%).

Table 1. Frequency of Unhealthy Coping Strategies Among Undergraduate Students (N = 150)

Unhealthy Coping Strategy	% of Students Reporting	
	Regular Use	Rank
Procrastination	65%	1
Excessive Social Media Use	58%	2
Emotional Eating	52%	3
Smoking	40%	4
Avoidance / Withdrawal	38%	5
Sleeping Pill Use	25%	6
Substance Use	15%	7

7.3 Perceived Impact on Academic Performance and Well-Being

A majority of participants acknowledged that unhealthy coping strategies **negatively affected their academic performance and mental health.**

- 53% reported that procrastination led to missed deadlines and last-minute preparation, contributing to lower grades.
- 46% stated that reliance on social media resulted in poor concentration and reduced study time.
- 42% indicated emotional eating or bingeing caused feelings of guilt and fatigue, impairing focus.
- 30% of students using smoking or sleeping pills reported decreased energy levels and motivation.

Table 2. Reported Consequences of Unhealthy Coping Strategies

Reported Consequence	% of Students Affected
Missed deadlines / poor time management	53%
Reduced concentration due to distractions	46%
Fatigue / lack of motivation	42%
Health issues (linked to smoking or pills)	30%
Decline in academic performance (self-reported)	55%

7.4 Overall Trend

Findings suggest that **avoidance-oriented and escapist behaviors** dominate students' coping repertoires. Instead of addressing stress through problem-solving or seeking support, students tend to rely on immediate but maladaptive relief strategies. These patterns collectively reflect a lack of awareness and limited access to structured coping resources within the university environment.

8. Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that undergraduate students at a private university in Karachi predominantly rely on **maladaptive coping strategies** to manage academic stress. The most common behaviors reported were **procrastination, excessive use of social media, emotional eating, smoking, avoidance**, and, to a lesser extent, **sleeping pill and substance use**. These findings reinforce previous research showing that avoidance-oriented strategies are widely used among students under academic pressure, but such behaviors often intensify stress rather than alleviate it (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Kausar, 2010; Talib & Zia-ur-Rehman, 2012).

8.1 Procrastination and Avoidance Behaviors

The high prevalence of **procrastination** (65%) suggests that students frequently delay tasks as a form of psychological escape. Similar patterns were identified by Klingsieck (2013), who noted that procrastination provides temporary relief from stress but ultimately exacerbates academic difficulties and reduces performance. In the Pakistani context, where academic expectations and parental pressure are high, procrastination may function as a defense mechanism against fear of failure or perceived inability to meet standards (Kausar, 2010). **Avoidance behaviors**, such as skipping lectures or ignoring assignments, were also evident in this study, consistent with findings from Misra and McKean (2000) that avoidance correlates with poor academic adjustment and higher anxiety levels.

8.2 Excessive Social Media Use

Over half of the participants (58%) reported excessive social media use as a coping strategy. This aligns with global research indicating that digital distraction is a common response to academic stress, providing momentary emotional relief but reducing productivity and concentration (Wong et al., 2006). In developing countries, where awareness of healthy coping and self-regulation is limited, social media engagement can quickly evolve into **problematic use**, reinforcing avoidance and procrastination cycles (Murff, 2005).

8.3 Emotional Eating and Health-Related Coping

Emotional eating was reported by 52% of students, highlighting the link between stress and physiological coping responses. This behavior mirrors findings by Bedewy and Gabriel (2015), who observed that emotional eating is a common maladaptive reaction among students with limited stress management skills. Although such behaviors may temporarily soothe distress, they often lead to guilt, fatigue, and health complications, further impairing academic focus (Abouserie, 1994). Similarly, a notable portion of participants reported **smoking (40%)** and **sleeping pill use (25%)**, both of which are consistent with escapist coping strategies documented by Sulaiman et al. (2009) in Malaysian university samples.

8.4 Substance Use and Risk Behaviors

Although **substance use** was less frequent (15%), its presence among undergraduates is concerning. Research by Agolla and Ongori (2009) and Talib and Zia-ur-Rehman (2012) similarly noted that some students resort to psychoactive substances when stress levels exceed their perceived coping capacity. Such behaviors indicate underlying emotional distress and lack of institutional support systems for stress regulation.

8.5 Impact on Academic Performance and Well-Being

Consistent with prior studies (Murff, 2005; Misra & McKean, 2000), students in this study acknowledged that unhealthy coping strategies hindered their academic performance. Over half reported **missed deadlines, reduced concentration, and low motivation**, illustrating the **vicious cycle of maladaptive coping**: stress leads to avoidance, which further impairs performance, thereby generating additional stress. These findings reinforce the transactional stress model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), suggesting that ineffective coping responses perpetuate rather than resolve academic challenges.

8.6 Cultural and Institutional Implications

In the **Pakistani higher education context**, the widespread use of maladaptive coping strategies may reflect both **cultural stigma** surrounding mental health support and **limited institutional interventions** (Kausar, 2010). Many universities lack formal counseling programs or stress management training, leaving students to rely on self-devised coping mechanisms. As Agolla and Ongori (2009) emphasize, without structured psychological support, students are more likely to internalize stress and adopt harmful behaviors.

8.7 Summary

Overall, the findings confirm that **maladaptive coping strategies dominate stress management behaviors** among undergraduate students in Karachi. These behaviors provide temporary psychological relief but undermine academic success and mental well-being. The prevalence of such coping patterns underscores the urgent need for awareness programs, counseling services, and psychoeducational interventions in universities.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that undergraduate students at a private university in

Karachi frequently rely on **maladaptive coping strategies**—including procrastination, excessive social media use, emotional eating, smoking, and avoidance—to manage academic stress. These behaviors, while offering short-term relief, often intensify psychological distress and negatively influence academic performance, leading to decreased concentration, poor time management, and reduced motivation. The limited prevalence of healthy coping mechanisms suggests a gap in students' awareness, access to guidance, and institutional support services. The results align with previous literature indicating that students under high academic pressure often adopt **avoidance-oriented and escapist coping patterns** (Kausar, 2010; Talib & Zia-ur-Rehman, 2012). In the Pakistani context, where stigma around help-seeking and mental health remains prevalent, students are less likely to access professional counseling or stress management resources. Consequently, maladaptive coping becomes normalized, perpetuating cycles of stress, academic underachievement, and emotional strain.

To address these challenges, the study recommends the following actions:

1. **Integration of Counseling Services:** Establish campus-based mental health and counseling centers offering confidential support and psychoeducation on stress management.
2. **Psychoeducational Workshops:** Conduct regular seminars on effective time management, problem-solving, and adaptive coping skills.
3. **Faculty Sensitization:** Train teachers to identify early signs of student stress and refer individuals to appropriate support resources.
4. **Curriculum Reform:** Balance academic workloads, deadlines, and assessment structures to reduce unnecessary pressure.
5. **Awareness Campaigns:** Promote open dialogue about mental health and

destigmatize counseling through peer-led initiatives and student well-being programs.

By implementing these strategies, universities can foster healthier academic environments, encourage adaptive coping practices, and ultimately enhance students' psychological resilience and academic success.

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