

STRESS COPING SKILLS IN ADOLESCENT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

AFRONTAMIENTO DEL ESTRÉS EN ADOLESCENTES ESTUDIANTES DE NIVEL MEDIO SUPERIOR

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence entails a reorganization of social, interpersonal interactions (Ávila, Heredia, Gómez & Martínez, 2006; Cardozo & Alderete, 2008), which generates stress (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2009). To deal with it, a variety of actions and cognitions are used, which prepare us to tolerate or minimize the effects produced by it (González, Montoya, Martina and Bernabeu, 2002). The purpose of this research is to describe the coping strategies used by adolescent high school students, making comparisons by sex and age. The work was done with 724 adolescents: 413 females and 311 males; ranging between 14 and 17 years of age, from Valle de Toluca, Estado de México. The Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS), developed by Frydenberg and Lewis (2000) was applied. The results obtained regarding the strategies used by adolescents in stressful situations are: to work hard and achieve, pursue relaxing diversions, and worry. Females use more strategies focused on solving the problem, and they handle their emotions, unlike males who evade the problem and are more emotionally reserved. Regarding the age comparison, it was found that 16-year olds employ problem-evasion strategies.

Keywords: adolescents, stress, coping, sex, age.

RESUMEN

La adolescencia supone una reorganización de las interacciones sociales, interpersonales (Ávila, Heredia, Gómez y Martínez, 2006; Cardozo y Alderete 2009), lo que genera estrés (Frydenberg y Lewis, 2000). Para afrontarla, se emplea un conjunto de acciones y cogniciones que capacitan para tolerar o minimizar los efectos producidos (González, Montoya, Martina y Bernabéu, 2002). El propósito de la investigación es describir las estrategias de afrontamiento que emplean los adolescentes estudiantes del nivel medio superior, realizando comparaciones por género y edad. Se trabajó con 724 adolescentes, 413 mujeres y 311 hombres, con un rango de edad entre 14 a 17 años, del Valle de Toluca, Estado de México. Se aplicó la Escala de Afrontamiento para Adolescentes (ACS), elaborada por Frydenberg y Lewis (2000). Los resultados obtenidos

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de las estrategias que emplean los adolescentes ante situaciones estresantes son: esforzarse y tener éxito, buscar diversiones relajantes y preocuparse. Las mujeres emplean más estrategias centradas en resolver el problema e intervienen sus emociones, a diferencia de los hombres que evaden el problema y son más reservados emocionalmente. Con respecto a la comparación por edad, se encontró que los de 16 años emplean estrategias de evasión del problema.

Palabras clave: adolescentes, estrés, afrontamiento, género, edad.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is considered a period of adaptation, crisis, stress and imbalance; it is a period that demands an individual's entire effort to adapt to new personal and social needs (Enríquez, Lira, Balcázar, Bonilla & Gurrola, 2009).

It is a period of deep change, which involves a reorganization of social interactions, since there are modifications in the interpersonal relationships with peers, parents and partners (Ávila et al., 2006; Cardozo & Alderete 2009). Thus, the adolescent is forced to play some social roles regarding their peers, the members of the other sex and, at the same time, be able to achieve good results at school and make decisions regarding their professional future, which can generate a great deal of stress (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2000).

Stress is considered a threatening stimulus because it causes a reorganization in a person's life, depending on its intensity and the degree to which it is perceived (Buendía, 1993; Casullo, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1986; Oblitas & Becoña, 2000). Regarding psychosocial stress, it is a relationship between the individual and the environment, which is assessed as threatening and can pose a hazard to

the individual's well-being, which gives rise to changes in the individual's life routine involving new conditions and needs to which he/she must respond (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986).

Such stressful experiences affect adolescents more and more, interfering in their behavior and health. The majority of the undesirable repercussions that afflict adolescents subject to stress are of a psychological nature, such as anxiety, depression and learning problems (Gaeta & Martín, 2009). This is due to the effects of stress in the physiological and immunological functioning faced with the accumulation of stressful events, which could affect the adolescent's wellbeing and health (Barra, Cerna, Kramm & Véliz, 2006).

These conditions are applicable to stressful, significant or intense events, and, additionally, to those minor stressors or daily problems that can have a cumulative effect and increase vulnerability by presenting physical or mental health problems (Barra et al., 2006). Notwithstanding, the potential consequences of stress are regulated through coping, i.e., through a group of actions and cognitions that train the adolescent to tolerate,

avoid or minimize the effects produced by a stressful event (González et al., 2002).

It is then possible to use positive coping strategies which reduce stress and promote long-term health, in contrast to the unadaptive strategies that reduce stress only in the short term, causing a harmful effect on health if more time elapses. By responding to these types of situations, less adaptive behaviors can generate with a greater vulnerability in the adolescent, affecting their psychological development an even their life. Such strategies are developed through childhood experiences and are modified according to the results obtained with regards to stressful situations (Velo, Caqueo, Muñoz & Villegas, 2010).

This coping skill, in other words, the behavioral and cognitive strategies used by the adolescent, is useful in attaining an effective adaptation and transition, which has a repercussion not only in their life, but also in their family's and in their social environment. The way in which the adolescent copes with problems can establish behavior patterns for their adult life (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2000).

González et al. (2002), suggest that there are similarities in women and men regarding their use of coping strategies and the use of a focalized style in the emotion. However, women tend to use more frequently the search for social support, so they use relationship coping styles, and they also pay attention to the positive and concentrate on problem solution. Additionally, women have been found to use an unadaptive coping style, which reflects in self-blaming and engaging in wishful thinking to feel better and suppressing tension.

On the other hand, males focus on improving their academic achievements

and maintaining their psychological well-being, using physical recreation, ignoring the problem or reserving it for themselves. Gaeta & Martín (2009) mention that, regarding the gender, the coping process can be influenced by culture and context.

In a study reported by Moysén (2011), high school students were found to use different strategies to face stressful life events, such as social support, planning and active coping (consisting of making specific plans to manage stress and implement those plans).

Regarding coping strategies in adolescents by age, González et al. (2002) refer that between 15 and 18 years of age they have a wider coping response roster as compared to younger adolescents, who develop a larger variety of coping strategies and use methods that reduce the impact of stress directly, involving the cognitive component (planned problem resolution, positive re-assessment and self-control), this due to the emergence thought of formal operations that help adolescents choose effective coping strategies. They are capable of abstract thinking, by considering several points of view and evaluating possible consequences (Gaeta & Martín, 2009).

However, adolescent's stress coping can be present based on several factors, such as the individual's problem solving social resources and skills, as well as their beliefs, values, personal and environmental limitations, and the degree of threat perceived by the adolescents (Gaeta & Martín, 2009).

Consequently, coping strategies used by adolescents are present depending on the experiences and the context where they evolve since the role played in different areas of their life, from family relationships, to school, love, among

others, have an influence in the development of stress-reducing strategies, whether positive or unadaptive. Also, there are differences regarding the presence of coping strategies according to the individual's sex, with some aspects of their life being affected, so this research focuses on identifying the coping strategies used by adolescent high school students, considering gender and age. All of the above originates the following questions that guided this research:

1. What are the coping strategies more frequently used by adolescent high school students in stressful situations?
2. What are the differences between the coping skills used in stressful situations by high school students according to gender and age?

METHOD

Research design

A quantitative study was conducted through a non-experimental, descriptive transversal design, which is performed without deliberately manipulating certain variables, collecting data at a single time. Its purpose is to describe variables and analyze the incidence and interrelationship at a given time (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2010).

Participants

An intentional probabilistic sampling was performed, by which the choice of elements does not depend on the probability but on causes related to the research characteristics, individuals considered as representative or typical of the population and who can provide information are chosen (Hernández, et al., 2010). The sample comprised 724 adolescents (413 females and 311 males), within a range of 14 to 17 years of age, who attend high school at four schools in Valle de Toluca, México State (see Table 1).

Instrument

The Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS, Frydenberg & Lewis, 2000) was used.

This scale allows examining adolescent coping behaviors, by obtaining information regarding how they act in various stressful situations. It comprises 80 items, 79 closed-end and one of the open type, by which the 18 coping strategies proposed in the literature can be assessed: to seek social support, focus on solving the problem, work hard to achieve, worry, invest in friendship, seek belonging, engage in wishful thinking, lack of coping or no coping, suppress tension, engage in social action, ignoring the problem, self-blame, keep

Table 1

Frequency and percentage of participants, according to age and gender

Age	Gender			
	Male		Female	
	F	%	F	%
14 years	14	1.93	23	3.17
15 years	160	22.09	211	29.14
16 years	69	9.53	103	14.22
17 years	68	9.39	76	10.49
Total	311	42.94	413	57.02

to oneself, seek spiritual support, focus on the positive, seek professional help, pursue relaxing diversions and physical recreation.

The 79 items are rated using a five-point scale, ranging from 'I Never Do it' to 'I Do it Frequently', with Cronbach's alpha internal consistency estimate $\alpha = .90$, in the Mexican adaptation by Bárcenas & Martínez (2008), and a percentage of explained variance of 57.498%. The ACS scales have been used in studies in Mexico, showing acceptable indexes of validity and reliability (Bárcenas & Martínez, 2008; Contreras, Chavez & Aragón, 2012; Martínez & Pedroza, 2011).

Procedure

Authorization was obtained from the high school education institutions' authorities where research was conducted for the application of the instrument. The teachers in charge of the class at the time of test application were the ones who invited their students to participate voluntarily. Each of the participants signed an informed consent; additionally, they were advised that the instruments would be analyzed in groups. The applications lasted 15 minutes on average. Data analysis was processed with the SPSS v. 20 statistical package, calculating mean, standard deviation, Student's *t*-test, and one way-analysis of variance. A $p \leq 0.05$ hypothesis was used.

RESULTS

The results are organized according to the objectives presented, i.e., the work begins with the description of coping strategies used by adolescents, next, the comparison by gender, and finally the age comparison.

Table 2 shows coping strategies in stressful situations used by adolescent high

school students. Based on the results obtained, work hard and achieve ($M=73.005$), relaxing diversions ($M=72.136$), and worry ($M=70.812$) were the most frequently used strategies.

Table 3 shows the results of coping strategy comparisons by gender, based on Student's *t*-test. The data obtained show statistically significant difference in 12 strategies, out of the 18 that comprise the instrument. Female participants use the following strategies more frequently: seek social support, work hard and achieve, worry, see belonging, engage in wishful thinking, suppress tension, self-blame, see spiritual support, and focus on the positive; on the other hand, male participants exhibit a higher mean in the strategies to ignore the problem, pursue relaxing diversions and physical recreation, so they tend to use these strategies more frequently.

Table 4 shows the results obtained from the one-way variance analysis, from the comparison between coping strategies on stressful situations and the age of the Valle de Toluca adolescent high school students. The data obtained show the statistically significant differences for the following strategies: worry, lack of coping or no coping, suppress, tension, ignore the problem, self-blaming, and pursue relaxing diversions. The 16-year old students represent the highest mean, since they use these strategies more frequently.

DISCUSSION

According to the results obtained, the coping strategies on stressful situations used by adolescent high-school students in Valle de Toluca, are: work hard and achieve, pursue relaxing diversions and worry, so they tend to cope with stressful situations by using a problem

Table 2*Coping strategies of adolescent high school students in Valle de Toluca*

Strategies	M	SD
1. Work hard to achieve	73.005	13.877
2. Pursue relaxing diversions	72.136	16.302
3. Worry	70.812	14.671
4. Focus on solving the problem	68.342	15.389
5. Focus on the positive	68.038	15.838
6. Physical distraction	67.756	21.308
7. Seek belonging	64.132	14.268
8. Invest in friendship	62.701	16.103
9. Seek social support	61.066	16.246
10. Seek professional help	56.933	19.039
11. Engage in wishful thinking	54.547	14.535
12. Keep to oneself	51.049	17.511
13. Self-blaming	47.948	17.155
14. Seek spiritual support	46.291	15.585
15. Suppress tension	37.917	13.234
16. Lack of coping or not coping	36.707	12.573
17. Ignore the problem	35.697	13.259
18. Social action	35.642	11.729

Note: Strategy frequency values: 90 to 100 are used very frequently, 70-89 often, 50-69 sometimes, 30-49 rarely, and 20-29 strategy not used. M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation.

Table 3*Comparison of coping strategies regarding gender, in Valle de Toluca high school students.*

Strategies	Female		Male		t	Sig.
	M	DE	M	DE		
Seek social support	62.67	16.26	58.93	15.99	3.085	.002
Focus on solving the problem	68.71	15.79	67.84	14.85	.760	.447
Work hard and achieve	74.21	13.88	71.39	13.72	2.721	.007
Worry	72.50	14.81	68.56	14.19	3.604	.000
Invest in friendship	62.69	16.20	62.71	15.99	.018	.986
Seek belonging	65.04	14.62	62.91	13.71	2.007	.045
Engage in wishful thinking	55.86	14.61	52.79	14.25	2.824	.005
Lack of coping or no coping	37.14	12.54	36.12	12.61	1.074	.283
Suppress tension	40.25	13.18	34.81	12.67	5.583	.000
Social action	35.29	11.42	36.10	12.12	.930	.353
Ignore the problem	34.70	12.46	37.00	14.16	2.317	.021
Self-blaming	49.15	17.73	46.35	16.23	2.209	.028
Keep to oneself	51.54	17.68	50.38	17.28	.888	.375
Seek spiritual support	47.66	15.83	44.46	15.08	2.742	.006
Focus on the positive	69.98	15.28	65.45	16.21	3.820	.000
Seek professional help	56.75	19.11	57.17	18.96	.290	.772
Pursue relaxing diversions	71.06	16.17	73.55	16.39	2.034	.042
Physical recreation	64.18	21.19	72.49	20.55	5.292	.000

Note: Sig. = Significance level

Table 4*Comparison of coping strategies related to age, in Valle de Toluca high-school students.*

Strategies	14		15		16		17		F	Sig.
	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE	M	DE		
Seek social support	58.05	14.31	61.74	16.45	60.67	15.57	60.5	16.98	.721	.540
Focus on solving the problem	68.00	17.07	68.23	15.99	68.13	14.44	68.9	14.55	.095	.963
Work hard and achieve	72.54	15.08	73.66	14.18	72.51	13.89	72.0	12.74	.599	.616
Worry	67.13	15.29	69.82	15.13	72.69	13.75	72.05	14.08	2.64*	.048
Invest in friendship	60.00	16.46	62.93	16.94	63.58	14.72	61.75	15.38	.710	.546
Seek belonging	62.59	15.00	65.09	14.31	63.88	13.71	62.3	14.51	1.49	.215
Engage in wishful thinking	53.51	14.55	54.61	14.57	54.41	13.88	54.77	15.30	.082	.970
Lack of coping or no coping	31.89	10.81	35.71	11.83	39.20	14.06	37.50	12.42	5.11*	.002
Suppress tension	35.45	13.66	35.95	12.18	41.02	14.03	39.88	13.83	7.56*	.000
Social action	35.94	10.79	34.74	11.02	37.44	12.87	35.72	12.16	2.09	.100
Ignore the problem	30.94	9.98	35.09	12.87	37.70	13.59	36.07	14.21	3.22*	.022
Self-blaming	45.00	16.99	46.45	16.63	50.81	17.83	49.13	17.30	3.15	.024
Keep to oneself	47.97	16.89	50.17	17.17	52.26	16.57	52.63	19.44	1.36	.253
Seek spiritual support	49.05	14.32	46.13	15.82	46.10	14.64	46.21	16.43	.409	.747
Focus on the positive	69.32	16.54	69.46	15.98	66.27	15.31	66.14	15.65	2.48	.059
Seek professional help	56.48	20.87	57.72	19.60	55.72	16.91	56.4	19.55	.478	.697
Pursue relaxing diversions	66.02	16.86	71.75	15.91	74.23	16.26	72.18	16.87	2.76*	.041
Physical recreation	65.83	18.70	69.01	21.50	68.90	20.50	63.6	22.01	2.51	.057

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation; Sig. = significance level

resolution style, in other words, when faced with an event they carry out efforts directed towards modifying the stress-causing environmental events, trying to solve the problem or at least reducing its impact (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986).

Wade and Tavis (2003) and Gaeta & Martín (2009) refer that coping is not the only strategy applicable to all situations; people cope in different ways, based on an individual's resources and social skills to solve problems, as well as their beliefs, values, personal, environmental limitations, and regarding the degree to which the threat is perceived. People can use different styles and strategies, they help them survive stress, but it also supports them to withstand adversity and make progress, learning from their experiences.

The adolescents in this study cope stressful events in different ways, i.e., they use their abilities to face their life events; a way in which they handle stress has to do with working hard to achieve, which consists of exhibiting work behaviors and personal involvement, such as doing homework, attending class and obtaining success in what they do. Also, they use strategies aimed at pursuing relaxing diversions, such as leisure situations (listening to music, reading a book, watching television, going out to have fun), and the strategy to worry, characterized by the adolescent's future happiness elements.

Solís & Vidal (2006) mention that the adolescent's behavior is engraved within a group of tasks, such as achieving identity, incorporation of value, financial, social and emotional independence from their parents, perspectives for the future and psychosexual development. However, the tasks described may become sources of stress with problems related to school, uncertainty regarding the future, family difficulties, social pressure,

problems related to the use of free time, romantic relationships and contradictions regarding themselves, so being able to fulfilling these tasks entails their well-being.

Regarding the comparison of coping strategies by sex, females use such strategies as seeking social support, work hard and achieve, worry, seek belonging, engage in wishful thinking, suppress stress, self-blaming, seek spiritual help and focus on the positive. In contrast, male participants use the following strategies, ignore the problem, pursue relaxing diversions and physical recreation.

Jensen (2008) mentions that females work next to their mothers since very young and learn how to take care of others (siblings and cousins), which is linked to seeking social support. On the other hand, this author indicates that males have more independence during adolescence, where the process of reaching manhood is filled with dangers and involves a possibility of failures; also, the adolescent has to show his capacity to provide, protect and procreate. González et al. (2002) refer that males focus on improving their academic achievement, tend to give preference to such strategies as, physical recreation, ignore the problem and keep to oneself.

To this regard, Gaeta & Martín (2009) mention that the coping process can be influenced by culture and context (socialization processes), so there may be some differences in stress coping strategies.

usually heighten at adolescence and not many deviations from the standard are tolerated. Also, females and males usually lead different lives; the expected behavior as well as the work they will perform at adulthood is clearly separated for (Jensen, 2008).

On the other hand, relating age, 16-year old adolescents were found to use coping strategies such as: worry, lack of coping or no coping, suppress tension, ignore the problem, self-blaming and relaxing diversions. This matches that referred by Gaeta & Martín (2009), who refer that older kids are capable of abstract thinking, by considering several points of view and evaluating the possible consequence. Also, González et al. (2002) mention that due to the emergence of formal operational thinking in 15 to 18 year olds, the older ones have a wider coping incongruence set, compared to the younger ones.

Age means experience and familiarity with many situations, which lead to a greater knowledge of our own resources, as well as in general a better set of coping strategies. The strategies used by adolescents vary according to the adolescence phase and to the cognitive changes, as well as particular environmental demands and social support characteristic of the early, medium and late periods of adolescence (Gaeta & Martín, 2009).

Also, emergence of formal operational thinking may help adolescents to select effective coping strategies, since they can be capable of abstract thinking, consider several points of view and assess consequences. Later, in the process of cognitive development, the self-control metacognitive process, associated to problem solving and emotional regulation strategies will have an effect on the adaptive coping of adolescents. (Gaeta & Martín, 2009).

Thus, adolescent high school students of Valle de Toluca cope with stress by using several strategies, showing differences in sex and age, while these factors are the one that can intervene in their use.

Although the study only considered and age range of 14 to 17 years, this contributes to

knowing the strategies used by adolescents that moving into higher education level, i.e., that are ready to choose a professional path, which leads the individual to solve problems, belief conflicts, values, personal and environmental limitations.

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