

STRESS, COPING AND SOCIAL SUPPORTS IN THE ADOLESCENT YEARS

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This paper results from a study that was conducted on 209 Form Four students from two schools in Penang. In this study, a semi-structured interview covering questions on demographics, a 12-item measure of self-esteem, and a 20-item measure of well-being was conducted. Students were also asked to report their Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) results as an indicator of their academic performance. To assess stress, coping and social supports, respondents were given a list of possible stressors (e.g., problems with relationships at home and school) and were asked to indicate whether or not they were bothered by these stressors, the type of coping that they had used in dealing with these stressors, and the type of social supports that they had received in relation to these stressors. A higher proportion of respondents (77%) identified issues related to academics and lessons as a problem compared to other issues (relationships at home, 34%, and relationships at school, 31%). The number of stressors related to everyday life was significantly related to well-being, but not to self-esteem or academic performance. Respondents reported a variety of problem-specific coping. Supports received were also problem-specific in nature. The findings have both applied and theoretical implications.

Keywords: stress, coping, social support, adolescent, relationships

INTRODUCTION

The adolescent period has been associated with dramatic changes and life challenges (Gormly, 1997; Larson & Ham, 1993; Jessor, 1993). Many teenagers deal with puberty, problems related to parents, the transition from primary to secondary schools, and pressure to perform academically. The inability to cope with problems related to the lives of

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teenagers may lead to other negative consequences such as poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and low well-being. These consequences, in turn, can lead to other problems and issues. It is likely that a teenager who is not performing well in school, has a low self-esteem, and is generally unhappy may not have positive relationships with teachers and peers, may exhibit a number of disciplinary problems at school, or may, in general, demonstrate a poor adjustment to life. In Malaysia, there has been an increase in the level of social problems related to teenagers. Among these problems are illegal motor-bike races and excessive loitering at shopping complexes. Both activities can potentially be negative and may lead to drug abuse and crime. It is possible that the increasing social problems among teenagers in Malaysia are, in fact, a manifestation of their inability to cope with the challenges of everyday life. Clearly, it is essential to understand the type of problems teenagers in Malaysia are facing and whether or not they are equipped with adequate coping skills to deal with these challenges. This study examines the way in which a group of teenagers in Malaysia copes with the problems related to everyday life. It explores the sources and levels of stress related to everyday life, the type of impact that these stressors might have on individuals, the type of coping strategies respondents employ to deal with these stressors, and the types of support received in relation to these stressors. This research also contributes to the theoretical knowledge regarding stress, social supports, and coping in general.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study are to examine the sources and levels of stress related to everyday life, the type of impact that stress related to everyday life might have on individuals, the type of coping strategies respondents employed to deal with these problems, and the types of support received in relation to these problems.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were 209 form four students from two schools in Penang. One hundred one respondents were from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Seri Balik Pulau, representing the rural sample. One hundred eight respondents were from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Dato' Haji Mohd Nor, representing the urban sample. Of the 209 participants, 105 were males and 104 were females. The average age was 16 years with a standard deviation of 0.17. One hundred eighty-nine of the participants were Malays, 8 were Chinese, 8 were Indians, and 4 were others. From this sample, 190 were Muslims, 6 were Buddhists, 2 were Christians, and 11 were Hindus.

Procedures

The first process involved identification of the schools. Due to time and financial constraints, only two schools were included in the study. One school was chosen to represent rural areas and the other to represent urban areas. On Penang Island, only a limited number of schools can be categorised as rural schools. From these schools, Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Seri Balik Pulau was chosen because of its obvious rural location. Sekolah Kebangsaan Dato' Haji Mohd Nor is situated in Gelugor and was chosen because its proximity to Universiti Sains Malaysia which makes it easily accessible. Once the schools were identified, the process of obtaining permission was carried out. Upon agreement of the principals of the schools, arrangements were made for interviews. Students were identified on the basis of their class and a variety of classes were included (e.g., science, arts, vocational, and accounting) in order to represent students from various academic backgrounds. Students from various classes were interviewed during the school period and the duration of the interview was approximately 15–20 minutes.

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Measures

Personal and family background

This measure tapped into five basic types of information; namely, age, sex, race, religion, and performance on the last Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR). For family background, there were three major focuses: parents' education level, parents' occupation, and parents' income.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem was assessed using a 12-item short questionnaire that focuses on how respondents view themselves in terms of their ability, performance, and talent.

Sources of stress, coping and social supports

Sources of stress were divided into eight broad categories: relationships at home, relationships at school, romantic relationships, academics, co-curriculum, health, financial, and others. The categories were derived from a list identified by a group of university students who were asked to list the type of problems they experienced when they were in form four. Respondents were asked whether they experienced any problems related to these broad categories. If they indicated "yes", they were asked to further explain the problem and whether or not they were bothered by the problem. To assess coping, they were asked to report the type of things that they had done, still do, and will do to overcome the problems. To assess social supports, respondents were asked whether they had anyone to help them, the type of things that these people did to help them, and whether or not these actions were helpful to them.

Psychological well-being

A 20-item assessment of psychological well-being was used. The measure was constructed based on the 22-item version of the Psychological General Well-being (PGWB) index (Dupuy, 1984). The PGWB index was developed to assess self-representations of interpersonal affective or emotional states, reflecting a sense of subjective well-being or distress. It has been used in a variety of

situations for participants aged between 14 and 90 years old (Dupuy, 1984). In the current study, a directly-translated PGWB index was not used; rather, a modified version of the index was used.

RESULTS

Findings are divided into four sections. The first section provides a description of the sources, level, and closer analysis of the problems. The second section analyses the relationship between levels of stress related to everyday life and well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance. A breakdown analysis of the problems in relation to well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance will also be presented. The third section consists of an analysis of the type of coping used. In the last section, a closer analysis of the support received and the relationship between satisfaction with the support received and well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance will be presented.

The Sources and Levels of Stress Related to Everyday Life

Table 1: Number of People Who Identified the Problems.

Problems	Number of people (Total N = 209)	Percentage (%)
Problems related to relationships at home	73	34.9
Problems related to relationships at school	66	31.5
Problems related to romantic relationships	38	18.1
Problems related to academics and lessons	161	77.0
Problems related to co-curriculum activities	49	23.4
Problems related to health	28	13.3
Problems related to money	54	25.8
Other problems	7	3.3

From Table 1, it can be concluded that the biggest problems identified by the respondents are those related to academics and lessons. Respondents also identified problems with relationships at home and relationships at school as other major sources of crises. Problems related to finances and co-curriculum activities were also identified as major problems.

As shown in Table 2, almost all of the problems were perceived as rather severe. At least 42% of the respondents who identified the problems reported to be at least somewhat bothered by the problems. A high percentage of people who identified other problems reported to be at least somewhat bothered.

Table 2: Percentage of Respondents Who Reported “somewhat bothered”, “bothered”, and “very bothered” By the Problems.

Problems	Percentage (%)
Problems related to relationships at home	58.9
Problems related to relationships at school	50.0
Problems related to romantic relationships	42.1
Problems related to academics and lessons	65.8
Problems related to co-curriculum activities	49.0
Problems related to health	60.7
Problems related to money	72.2
Other problems	85.7

Table 3: Summary of the Descriptions of the Problems.

Problems	Description of the problems
Problems related to relationships at home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Primarily related to conflicts at home occurring between respondents and their siblings while some involved parents. - Severity of the problems vary; some are rather trivial e.g., fighting over television’s remote control) but some very serious (e.g., drugs and fighting between parents).
Problems related to relationships at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Primarily related to conflict with other students, particularly those of a different gender and ethnicity. - Some conflicts led to verbal (e.g., name calling) and physical violence (e.g., fist fight). - Some conflicts occurred between respondents and their teachers. - Some respondents reported teachers hitting them and calling them bad names.

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Table 3: (continued)

Problems	Description of the problems
Problems related to romantic relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Problems reported may be associated with different stage of relationship. - Some reported problems occurred in trying to initiate a romantic relationship (e.g., trying to gain someone's attention, attracted to own sex). - Other reported problems were associated with an on-going relationship (e.g., jealousy, fighting, and misunderstanding). - There were problems associated with the end of a relationship (e.g., break-off)
Problems related to academics and lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Problems mainly in the form of inability to follow academic lessons. - Both science subjects (e.g., Mathematics and Physics) and arts subjects (e.g., English and History) were equally likely to be reported as difficult. - Other problems include inability to follow academic lessons because other students (typically boys) were making too much noise and teachers do not have the skills to teach.
Problems related to co-curriculum activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The major problem associated with co-curriculum activities is that they are burdensome. - Many reported having problems attending the activities. - Some reported not liking the activities offered.
Problems related to health	Health problems reported were mainly those related to chronic illnesses such as asthma, gastric, migraine, heart problems, and allergies.
Problems related to money	Problems were mainly not having sufficient money for home, school, books, personal items such as clothes, and recreational activities.
Other problems	Other problems were primarily problems related to relationships at home. Only one problem was related to missing bicycles.

From Table 3, it can be concluded that the respondents experienced a variety of problems at various intensities. Some problems are rather severe (e.g., parental conflict, serious health problems) while others are rather mild (e.g., missing bicycles, insufficient money for recreational activities).

Relationships Between Stress Related to Everyday Life, Well-being, Self-esteem and Academic Performance

As shown in Table 4, number of problems or stress related to everyday life was significantly negatively correlated with well-being. Individuals who experienced a larger number of problems reported a lower level of well-being. However, number of problems was not related to self-esteem and academic performance. Self-esteem, however, was significantly positively related to well-being (i.e., the higher the self-esteem, the greater the well-being).

Table 4: Relationships Between Stress Related to Everyday Life, Well-being, Self-esteem, and Academic Performance.

	Well-being	Self-esteem	Academic Performance
Stress related to everyday life	-.340(**)	-.049	-.085
Well-being		.283(**)	.095
Self-esteem			-.063

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5: Relationship Between Individual Problems and Well-being, Self-esteem, and Academic Performance.

	Well-being	Self-esteem	Academic performance
Problems related to relationships at home	-.151	-.054	.076
Problems related to relationships at school	-.049	-.004	.259(*)
Problems related to romantic relationships	-.452(**)	.035	-.238
Problems related to academics and lessons	-.106	.027	-.024
Problems related to co-curriculum activities	-.174	.012	.045
Problems related to health	-.434(*)	.046	-.044
Problems related to money	-.217	-.259	-.011
Other problems	-.483	-.408	-.287

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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Table 5 shows that only three problems appeared to have an impact on well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance. Problems at school were significantly related to academic performance, problems related to romantic relationships were significantly negatively correlated with well-being, and problems with health were also significantly negatively correlated with well-being.

Coping Strategies Employed to Deal with the Problems

Table 6: Summary of the Analysis of the Coping Strategies Reported for Each Type of Problem.

Problems	Description of the Coping Strategies
Problems related to relationships at home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many of the coping strategies were not directly related to the problems. - Some ignored the problems by not doing anything and others talked to friends in order to feel better. - Very few used problem-related coping.
Problems related to relationships at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There was a high degree of coping that attempted to deal with the problems. - A number of respondents dealt with the problems by trying to talk to the people with whom they were in conflict. This was particularly true for those who were having problems with their peers. - Some talked to teachers, parents, and counsellors.
Problems related to romantic relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Different types of coping strategies were used for each stage of the problem. - For the beginning and the end stages, coping appeared in the form of distraction (tried to concentrate on other things, tried to make self busy). - For problems associated with the on-going relationships, a more problem-focused approach was taken. Coping was in the form of “trying to talk to that person”.
Problems related to academics and lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There was a high degree of coping that attempted to deal with the problems. - Respondents reported attempts to study harder, to discuss in groups, to request help from elder brothers and sisters, to attend tuition class, and to discuss with teachers.
Problems related to co-curriculum activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many of the respondents reported a distraction strategy in the form of ignoring and ending co-curriculum activities. - Some made attempts to re-arrange their schedules and tried to attend at least some of the meetings.

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Table 6: (continued)

Problems	Description of the Coping Strategies
Problems related to health	- Coping strategies included taking medication, watching diet, seeing doctors, and taking care of themselves
Problems related to money	- Most respondents reported having to be very careful with money. - Some tried to earn extra money by working part-time while others tried to save.
Other problems	- A variety of coping strategies were reported depending on the problem. - For problems related to conflict in relationships, coping strategies were emotion-focused. - For problem related to practical issues, coping was more problem-focused.

As shown in Table 6, respondents employed a variety of coping strategies, which they appeared to use appropriately depending upon the problem. For problems related to money, coping appeared to be directly related to money. For problems related to health, coping strategies were in the form of taking better care of oneself.

Supports Received in Relation to the Problems

Respondents appeared to be receiving various types of support from various sources (Table 7). It is interesting to note that the types of support given by various sources seemed to be specialised. Parents appeared to provide more problem-focused supports in terms of advice and financial and practical help. Friends provide more emotion-focused supports while teachers gave support mainly in relationship to school and academic issues.

As shown in Table 8, satisfaction with support was not significantly related to well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance, except for one. Satisfaction with support received in dealing with problems related to academics and lessons was significantly related to self-esteem.

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Table 7: Summary of the Analysis on Supports Received in Relation to Each Type of Problem.

Problems	Description of the Supports Received
Problems related to relationships at home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support mainly came from family members not involved in the conflict (e.g., in fighting with sisters or brothers, mothers helped by becoming the mediator). - Friends also helped but gave more emotional support while family members tend to provide more problem-focused and tangible supports.
Problems related to relationships at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supports primarily came from friends. - Supports came in the form of advice on how to deal with the problems and emotional support. - Some friends talked to the other person.
Problems related to romantic relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Almost all supports related to these problems came from friends and in the form of advice on how to handle the relationship and emotional support. - Only two persons reported support from parents and support was in the form of warning against involvement in a romantic relationship.
Problems related to academics and lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supports in dealing with the problems came from family members, teachers, and friends. - Teachers, elder siblings, and friends helped by teaching them as much as they could. - Parents helped by paying for tuition class.
Problems related to co-curriculum activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support came in the form of tangible support from friends, parents, and neighbours. - Parents helped by sending the respondents to school and neighbours helped by taking care of younger siblings for those who otherwise would not attend co-curriculum activities because they had to take care of their siblings.
Problems related to health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supports mainly came from family members and friends in the form of advice on how to take care of their health and tangible supports by taking them to see a doctor.
Problems related to money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support comes from mothers by trying to give some money. - Siblings also helped by lending money. - Friends sometimes do the same.
Other problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support mostly came from friends and family members in the form of emotional supports.

Table 8: Correlation Between Satisfaction with Supports and Well-being, Self-esteem and Academic Performance.

	Well-being	Self-esteem	Academic Performance
Support with problems with relationships at home	.129	-.016	-.022
Support with problems with relationships at school	.170	.147	-.208
Support with problems with romantic relationships	-.050	-.291	-.233
Support with problems with academics and lessons	.000	.224(*)	.010
Support with problems related to co-curriculum activities	-.480	-.123	.310
Support with problems related to health	.102	.232	.148
Support with problems related to money	.248	.033	-.022
Support with other problems	.580	.601	.854

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that respondents who participated in this study, in particular, and Malaysian teenagers, in general, consider their life to be somewhat stressful. This is especially the case in relation to academics and lessons. This result is consistent with Crystal et al. (1994) findings that Asian students experience pressure in relation to their academic performance. In their study, which was conducted on a group of Japanese, Chinese, and American high school students, they found that Asian students reported higher levels of parental expectations and lower levels of parental satisfaction with their academic performance. In this study, respondents reported that lessons were difficult to follow. It is likely that a combination of difficult lessons and high parental expectations may lead to students experiencing a high level of stress.

Participants may have also reported that lessons were difficult to follow due to transitional problems. Studies have demonstrated that some students find the school transition to be difficult and this transition can

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impact academic performance (Siedman et al., 1994; Simmon & Blyth, 1987). Siedman and colleagues found that the transition is particularly difficult for those in urban settings (Siedman et al., 1994). This finding suggests that it may be important to examine the type of demands teachers, parents, and the education system place on students. It is possible that students are forced to complete lessons that are difficult without the skills or supports needed to deal with problems related to academics and lessons.

Relationship issues were also identified as problematic, but to a lesser degree. These issues include problems related to relationships at home and at school. In terms of problems related to relationships at home, the level of conflict between respondents and their parents was relatively low compared to other groups. However, conflict with parents did occur, and this is somewhat consistent with findings by Smetna (1989). In her study, Smetna (1989) found that teenagers were more likely to perceive disputes over typical tasks such as household chores and homework as personal issues that should not be within the realm of parental control. Some teenagers rebel for more control over decisions in areas such as clothing and styles and choice of friends (Clemens & Rust, 1979).

The more prominent types of conflict were the conflict between respondents and siblings and respondents and friends. In the classic theory of psycho-social development, Erikson (1968) suggested that during adolescence, boys' and girls' primary concern is forming their ego-identities. During this period, there is an increase in self-awareness. When forming their identities, they are likely to look to their peers rather than their parents for guidance. At this point, peer pressure may be quite high. Friends are likely considered vital and, thus, conflict between friends can be stressful, as indicated in this study. A relatively smaller number of respondents reported problems with romantic relationships. These patterns of relationship-related problems were not surprising since relationships are characterised by dual facets. On the one hand, relationships provide supports and help and, on the other hand, they can also be a source of stress and conflict.

Other problems identified were financial constraints and demands of the co-curriculum activities. With regards to co-curriculum activities, it may be important to examine the practicality and value of the programs. While there was only a small number of people who identified health

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problems, their problems appeared to be rather severe. Most of the problems were related to chronic illnesses such as asthma and gastric problems. The study did not specify the types of support schools provided for students with health problems. Most of the supports provided came from parents and friends.

When examining the relationship between number of stressors related to everyday life and well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance, stress related to everyday life was negatively correlated with well-being. Individuals who reported a higher level of stress related to everyday life experienced a lower level of well-being. This is consistent with other findings that stress related to everyday life may influence a person's mental and physical health (Fisher & Hood, 1987). In a study that focused on transitional stress, students beginning the first semester at a university reported a higher level of psychological disturbance and absent-mindedness since they began their study (Fisher & Hood, 1987). One hundred students completed the MHQ (Middlesex Hospital Questionnaire), a measure of psychological disturbance; CFQ (Cognitive Failures Questionnaire), a measure of absent-mindedness; DRI (Dundee Relocation Inventory), a self-report of homesickness; CAQ (College Adaptation Questionnaire), a measure of adaptation to university life. The major finding showed an increase in depression and obsessionality as well as an increase in absent-mindedness six weeks into the semester compared to prior to leaving home.

The current study did not find evidence of a significant relationship between number of reported stressors related to everyday life and self-esteem and academic performance. It is likely that the measure used to assess self-esteem is rather limited and future studies should employ a more extensive measure of self-esteem. PMR results were used as an indicator of academic performance. However, respondents appeared to be a fairly homogeneous group with comparable PMR results, leading to little variation among them. This makes it difficult to make a conclusive statement regarding the non-existent effect of stress related to everyday life on academic performance. Future studies may use a more current assessment of academic performance such as the results of the latest monthly tests.

When examining the relationship between each type of problem and well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance, only three problems

exhibited a significant relationship. Problems related to relationships at school were significantly positively related to academic performance. It appeared that those who scored high in academic performance also reported a greater number of problems. It is likely that good students who concentrate on performing academically do not work as hard at social aspects, which may lead to more relationship problems. Problems related to romantic relationships were negatively correlated with well-being. Individuals who reported a greater number of romantic problems also experienced a lower level of well-being. Romantic relationships are quite personal and emotional in nature, which may explain the strong effect on psychological well-being. Problems related to health were significantly related to well-being. This relationship is likely due to the fact that the well-being assessment partly assessed health problems.

Within the context of this study, coping is defined as the cognitive and behavioural efforts to control, lessen, or tolerate internal and/or external demands produced by a stressful experience (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping has two basic functions, to manage emotion or distress (i.e., emotion-focused coping) and to deal with the problem that is causing the distress (i.e., problem-focused coping). Respondents employed a variety of coping mechanisms and they seemed to try to match the appropriate type of coping to the problems. For example, for problems related to relationships, there was a higher degree of attempting to cope by using a more emotion-focused coping compared to problems related to academics and lessons. For problems related to romantic relationships, respondents used a different type of coping for issues related to different stages of relationships. For the beginning and ending of relationships, in which there was a lesser degree of control, coping was primarily in the form of emotion-focused coping. In the middle of relationships, when the problems were more controllable, coping was in the form of problem-focused coping. These findings suggest that people intuitively understand that different strategies focus on different aspects of the problem and may have different impacts. Respondents appeared to use strategies rather differently depending upon how they viewed the problems. This seems to suggest that research on coping should move beyond describing the type of coping (Lazarus, 1990) and focus on how different types of coping may be more effective for different situations.

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In the current study, social supports are divided into five categories: emotional, esteem, information, network, and tangible. Consistent with the specificity in coping and problems, supports provided also appeared to be tailored to the problems. For emotion-related problems such as relationships, supports were more emotional in nature. This is compared to problems that were related to academics and lessons. Sources of support also provide support differently. Parents provided more problem-focused supports compared to friends. Teachers primarily provide support for school-related issues.

However, an analysis of satisfaction with support showed that it had little impact on well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance. It is important to note that parents of teenagers did not provide a great deal of emotional support to their children. There was only limited evidence that emotional and esteem support were provided. This finding is concerning since teenagers are vulnerable at this stage and a high degree of emotional support from parents may be of great help. Yet, adolescents received the main bulk of emotional support from friends. It is important for parents to play a more active role and continue to provide all types of support at great level to ensure that their teenage daughters or sons persevere through challenges that are associated with adolescence.

The findings of this study have two major implications, one that is applied in nature and another that relates to the theoretical perspective and development. Looking at the big picture, it is concluded that young people in this study, in particular, and Malaysian teenagers, in general, face various life challenges and experience distress. They are at risk of becoming dissatisfied and unhappy teenagers and may choose to become involved in negative activities such as gangsterism, bullying, drug abuse, sexual misconduct, and crime. Attempts must be made to help teenagers cope with the challenges in their life. Future studies should aim to identify the teenagers at risk and efforts must be combined to conduct programmes that can aid these young people. Essential features that should be incorporated in these programmes include those that can facilitate and foster a variety of coping skills and those that allow young people to strengthen their own support group that will help them if and when stress occurs. Family members, particularly parents, should also be aware of the types of challenges that their children face and should try provide a variety of supports including emotional and esteem support, and not only those supports related to the problems.

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From a theoretical perspective, the most important finding from this study is that respondents experience various forms of stress but also use various forms of coping and receive various forms of support. This suggests the importance of examining the actual interactions between different types of problems and different types of coping and supports rather than merely describing the type of coping used and the types of support received. Future studies must be designed in a way that can test the most effective matching between problems, coping, and supports. This can help strengthen the current knowledge regarding relationships between stress, coping, and social supports. Theory must move beyond merely describing the general relationships between stress, coping, and social supports and focus on the more specific nature of interactions between different types of stress, coping, and social supports.

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