

EXPLORING COPING STRATEGIES OF HOMELESS FORMER PRISONERS IN CHOW KIT ROAD, KUALA LUMPUR

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ABSTRACT

Subsisting on the streets requires homeless former prisoners to execute coping strategies, which were suggested in three major categories, namely, problem-solving-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance. A lack of understanding exists regarding the coping strategies that homeless former prisoners utilise in navigating extremely challenging life conditions on the streets. Three strategies were selected and scrutinised in the current study to explore the key coping mechanism frequently employed by homeless former prisoners in tackling subsistence problems or challenges on the streets. A qualitative approach was administered by interviewing 30 homeless former prisoners to identify personal preferences for coping strategies. The findings revealed that the coping mechanisms were regularly employed simultaneously depending on the circumstances. Particularly, a higher tendency was demonstrated in applying avoidance coping operations, including drug abuse, solitude, pleasure-seeking activities, and worship, amongst homeless former

prisoners. Nevertheless, homeless former prisoners also applied problem-solving-focused coping strategies by searching for potential methods of higher income generation to improve their survival prospects. Summarily, formerly incarcerated individuals implemented coping strategies either collectively or interchangeably, subject to their current situations with varying suitabilities when subsisting on the streets. The implementation of these enhancements, along with greater integration of collective coping, will contribute to the advancement of significant intervention research. Research into coping strategies among homeless former prisoners can shed light on how these individuals adapt to life outside the prison system, how they develop survival skills, and how these skills may influence their behaviour and attitudes after release. Studying coping mechanisms post-release can offer insights into the challenges these individuals face when transitioning back into society.

Keywords: homeless former prisoner, problem-solving-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, avoidance coping

INTRODUCTION

Former prisoners frequently subsist on the streets owing to reintegration failure, which poses significant difficulties in fulfilling living necessities and negatively impacts their future reintegration likelihood (Petersilia 2009). Due to the grave life hardships on the streets, homeless former prisoners are impelled to strategise various coping mechanisms, namely problem-solving-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance, which are the present study objectives. Problem-solving-focused coping strategies are crucial to alleviate and reduce stressful situations and improve mental health well-being and situations. Meanwhile, avoidance coping approaches are applied when homeless former prisoners remain silent, isolate themselves from outsiders, and sleep exceedingly to minimise the feelings of stress and frustration. In this regard, the absence of a stable job, a conducive shelter, and an accepting family with the presence of a discriminatory society render homeless former prisoners highly vulnerable to multiple life stressors.

The negative impact of homelessness on former prisoners includes experiencing housing instability (Cooper, Durose and Snyder 2014; Nilsson et al. 2023), unsupportive family members (Brunton-Smith and McCarthy 2017), unemployment (Berg and Huebner 2011; Denver, Siwach and Bushway 2017), mental illnesses (Abracen et al. 2013; Brown 2016), drug abuse (Maruna 2011; Sota and Agolli 2015), inaccessibility to public assistance (Chikadzi 2017), disadvantaged neighbourhoods, societal discriminations (Morenoff and Harding 2014), negative peers (Taylor and Becker 2015), and physical maladies (Sanei and Mir-Khalili

2015), subsequently engendering high levels of reintegration failure, low degrees of emotional intelligence, and frequent degradation into homelessness (Stephens and Nel 2014). As homeless individuals are the most continually marginalised group in society (Johnstone et al. 2015), who constantly experience social exclusion and isolation with quotidian exposure to societal stigma (Iveson and Cornish 2016), only a dearth of data and information are available to investigate homelessness categories. Resultantly, homeless individuals possess low levels of confidence and self-efficacy contributed by a wide variety of practical challenges, such as housing, employment, and income, ultimately leading to feelings of helplessness and utter dependency (Fitzpatrick, Johnsen and White 2011).

Coping strategies, influenced by various factors, including culture, experience, environment, and personality (Susilo et al. 2021), are psychological and behavioural tools individuals use to manage and alleviate stress and pressure (Li et al. 2022). Coping strategies are crucial for maintaining mental and emotional well-being, enhancing resilience, and enabling effective handling of challenging situations (Stephenson and DeLongis 2020). They encompass conscious actions and thoughts to manage conflicts and meet internal and external demands that can impact a person's overall well-being and survival. Coping strategies make use of personal or environmental resources to manage stress. Their effectiveness depends on the individual, the situation, and the specific type of stressor encountered, as noted by Cooper and Cartwright (2018) and LaCourse et al. (2019).

A knowledge gap existed in grasping the preferred coping strategies implemented by former prisoners when subsisting on the streets in their tremendously stressful life paths (Pittaro 2018). Therefore, this study sought to bridge the gap by providing immediate emphasis on existing empirical sources and documentation of the coping strategies executed by homeless former prisoners after prison release. The current study would also enrich contemporary literature as limited relevant studies were conducted in delineating the coping strategies employed by Malaysian homeless former prisoners, in which local research was unavailable. Besides, a majority of previous studies generally focused on the topics of drug addicts, former prisoners, and homeless individuals, while a plethora of local studies discussed the contributing factors of reintegration failure or recidivism in the country (Cheah, Unithan and Raran 2020; Mohd Alif et al. 2022; Mohd Alif, Noralina et al. 2023; Mohd Alif, Nazirah et al. 2023; Tharshini et al. 2018). Correspondingly, the exploration efforts implemented in the current study on the coping mechanisms of homeless former prisoners would contribute to closing the knowledge gap, which could be pertinent to relevant authorities and policymakers in developing effective interventions to resolve the complicated issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are situations where individuals aim to surmount a difficulty, either consciously or unconsciously, in managing and reducing the triggered stress (Lazarus and Folkman 1984a; Weiten and Llyod 2008) emanating from a situation with a perceived gap between demand and ability (Sarafino 2002). Coping strategies are also regularly perceived as coping mechanisms or coping skills, which are self-adaptation amidst stressful events to proactively prevent or mitigate fatigue and stress. The effectiveness of coping efforts depends on the tension types, the individuals, and the environmental conditions, due to the coping responses that are partially influenced by personality (habitual traits) while predisposed by the social environment, particularly stressful circumstances (Carver and Connor-Smith 2010). Hence, the coping mechanism aims to restore an individual's functionality to a psychologically optimal level. Furthermore, coping is considered the behavioural or cognitive pattern to diminish or eliminate psychological tension in a stressful situation (Haber and Runyon 1984), which could influence and shape an individual's personality through emotions, notions, and actions. Particularly, the relevant demeanours of resilience were regarded as a pertinent response to stress and a pathway to effective intervention (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984b) defined resilience as a behavioural and cognitive response to managing certain external and internal demands which exceed personal resources. Accordingly, Folkman and Lazarus (1985; 1988) postulated two cognitive-focused methods with which individuals could formulate action forces, namely problem-solving-focused and emotion-focused. Particularly, a problem-solving-focused action force refers to an approach through which an individual seeks to change a stressful situation by actively seeking accommodation or employment opportunities (Carroll 2013). Whereas emotion-focused coping could be an avoidance strategy wherein an individual does not endeavour to alter an event but gauges self-perceived appropriate manners in managing and lessening emotional stress, including drug and alcohol abuse.

Endler and Parker (1999) classified three categories of three-dimensional coping strategies, including task-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-focused action. Task-focused coping, or engagement-focused coping, was defined as an individual effort to solve problems through cognitive planning or rearrangement by emphasising the tasks at hand, whereas emotion-focused coping referred to reducing stress through emotional responses, such as self-blame. Meanwhile, avoidance-focused coping was cognitive activities and strategies executed to avoid

stressful situations, for example, preoccupying oneself with another engagement. Concurrently, emotion-focused and avoidance-focused coping mechanisms were also perceived as disengagement-focused coping strategies, which diverted attention from stress sources. Specifically, researchers and academicians sought to grasp individual characteristics, including past experiences, genetic configuration, temperament, and cognitive preferences, which generated unique negative or positive stress responses.

Implemented Coping Strategies for Managing Street Life

The homelessness issue deriving from reintegration failure amongst former prisoners is a social challenge persistently encountered by the justice system in various countries since the establishment of prisons. Particularly, coping mechanisms in elevating emotional and psychological well-being degrees (Calvete and Connor-Smith 2006) are vital for homeless individuals, owing to continuously high tension levels from the constant exposure to criminal activities, violence, and sexual harassment on the streets (Fitzpatrick et al. 2007). Generally, stress is defined as the physical nonspecific responses to harmful stimuli – “stressors” (Selye and Fortier 1949), while specifically, psychological tension is the evaluation of an individual on the environment as burdening or exceeding personal mental resources in maintaining well-being (Amnie 2018; Lazarus and Folkman 1984a; 1987). The coping approaches executed by homeless former prisoners are convoluted to be determined due to personal dissimilarities, which could act as an antecedent or a consequence of their living conditions (Opalach et al. 2016).

With multiple coping strategies accessible to individuals amidst stressful events, the first generation of researchers perused and categorised various coping strategies (Cohen and Lazarus 1973) into three dimensions, namely problem-solving-focused, emotion-focused and avoidance coping strategies (Cohen and Lazarus 1973; Roth and Cohen 1986). Notwithstanding the inconsistent findings in contemporary literature (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004; Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2011), problem-solving-focused coping encompasses endeavours to acquiesce, resolve, and minimise the negative repercussions of stressful situations, while emotion-focused coping comprises self-preoccupation, fantasy, or other conscious activities related to the influencing rules. The importance of both dimensions mentioned above in appraising the action forces employed by homeless former prisoners to counterpoise negative street life events is evidenced by an abundance of the action force measures developed based on the respective characteristics of the two dimensions (Endler and Parker 1990a; 1990b; Folkman and Lazarus 1985; 1988).

Another fundamental dimension identified in early literature is avoidance coping strategies (Roth and Cohen 1986), which incorporate either person-focused or task-focused responses or both. A person may respond to a stressful or exasperating situation by approaching another individual as a social distraction, but they could also perform a substitution task to distract themselves from the negative event. Although the former two dimensions chiefly focus on action forces resolving problems and negative emotions, the scale of rejection responses, namely avoidance, has also been included in various techniques of the two coping strategies (Endler and Parker 1990a; 1990b; Krohne et al. 2000). The mechanisms of avoidance coping strategies can be varied but are not limited to alcohol and drug abuse, which generate the “denial” sentiment by not expressing personal feelings and evading solitude with self-preoccupation (Gladstone 2008).

Ferguson, Bender and Thompson (2015) demonstrated that homeless youths would conduct both adaptive and maladaptive approaches to continue subsisting on the streets and survive, such as problem-solving-focused techniques regardless of positive or negative efforts, avoidance of emotional problems, and social resilience exhibition, either receiving social support or performing social withdrawal (Kidd and Carroll 2007). Besides, Unger et al. (1998) found that homeless youths would be inclined towards problem-solving-focused coping strategies when experiencing positive levels of physical and mental health, whereas higher usage levels of avoidance or disengagement-focused coping strategies were preferred when being associated with mental maladaptations, including depression, behavioural issues (Votta and Manion 2003), and suicidal ideation (Kidd and Carroll 2007).

Klitzing (2003) unveiled that homeless women frequently encountered chronic stress owing to life challenges. Conceptually, chronic stress is divergent from ordinary stress caused by negative events, trauma and daily complications, which are the typical research areas in contemporary literature highlighting coping strategies. Chronic stress is not necessarily induced by a specific negative event. In Klitzing’s (2003) study, homeless females were probed on their resolutions to the stress of subsisting vagrantly before respective themes, including religious engagement, optimism, active problem-solving, solitude predisposition, and mutual interactions, emerged. However, the use of avoidance as a coping strategy, such as denying one’s feelings of depression or disregarding the causes of their depression, aligns with societal expectations of masculinity that often stigmatise sadness as feminine (O’Gorman et al. 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The comprehensive depiction of the research process, known as the research opinion, was initially presented by Saunders et al. (2015). The researcher explored the informant's views on the factors that cause them to end up homeless. Research on narratives attempts to investigate and conceptualise the human experience as it is expressed in written works. The goal of narrative research is to get rich and free-ranging discourse by working with small samples of participants to obtain an in-depth examination of the meanings that individuals give to their experiences (Kim and Sherry 2010).

Location, Population and Sampling

This study was conducted in Chow Kit Road, Kuala Lumpur, due to a high number of homeless people from former prisoner backgrounds living in this area. The following inclusive criteria were established for the study sample, i.e., the informants must: (1) be 21 years old or above, (2) be Malaysian citizens, (3) have a prison record, (4) live as a homeless person on the streets, and (5) have no mental problems. The researcher cooperated with the Ar-Riqab Welfare Organisation, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) located on Chow Kit Road that provides the homeless with food, clothing, health assistance, and identification cards, to identify relevant informants' identification. The organisation has also established a good rapport with the homeless individuals, which rendered it easier to obtain the informations mentioned above.

Data Collection

The researcher initiated data collection with semi-structured questions derived from prior homeless-related research. Interviews, lasting 40 minutes to 60 minutes each, were recorded for accuracy using a recording device. Depending on the study's significance, interviews were conducted either once or repeatedly. The researcher, a volunteer organisational member, efficiently gathered the necessary samples. Identification of informants led to the discovery of 30 homeless former prisoners. Data collection concluded upon reaching data saturation with the 30th informant, demonstrating the thoroughness of the research process.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (COA No: JEP-2021-316). The first researcher was a former PhD student (2020 to 2023) in the field of social work from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, received an ethical approval for the interview protocol in conducting this study.

Data Analysis Technique

Prior to conducting the study coding process, the recording obtained from informants must be verbatim transcribed. Verbatim transcripts imply informants' dialogues written word for word based on the interviews conducted. Thematic analysis was employed where the researcher coded any information that complemented the research objectives. The identified codes, which were named following the researcher's background knowledge and understanding, were then classified post-coding for primary or superordinate theme development. Resultantly, the coding process attained a saturation level on the 30th informant's transcript, given the absence of novel codes or sub-themes. The codes were extracted for interpretation purposes, which began by writing and explaining the obtained outcomes that are presented in the following sections.

FINDINGS

Social Demography of Homeless Former Prisoners

The current study interviewed 30 homeless former prisoners comprised of 20 Malay males, 5 Chinese males, and 5 Malay females. Six homeless informants originated from Perak; four from Kuala Lumpur; three from Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, and Johor, respectively; two from Selangor, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, and Kelantan, respectively; and one from Melaka, Pahang, and Sabah, respectively. In terms of education level, nine informants possessed Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) qualification, another nine with Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) qualification, six with Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) qualification, two with a Malaysian Skills Institute Certificate, one was educated until the Form 1 level, another until grade three of primary school level, and two were not formally educated, which suggested low education levels amongst the homeless former prisoners which would generate negative impacts on stable employment. In terms of the number of incarcerations served, the findings revealed that 3 homeless informants possessed a prison record between 1 and 2 times, 7 between 3 and 5 times, 12 between 6 and 10 times, 5 exceeding 10 times, and 3 exceeding 20 times,

thus demonstrating that the majority were repeatedly incarcerated. The findings revealed that the former prisoners would return to Chow Kit Road upon prison release every time, owing to the ongoing reintegration failure and lack of stable shelter. Although several former prisoners managed to secure accommodation momentarily before failing in rental payments, the financial insufficiency due to unemployment regularly contributed to their vagrancy. The following sections present relevant discussions of the study findings regarding the coping mechanisms of homeless former prisoners in overcoming subsistence challenges on Chow Kit Road while fulfilling the study objectives.

Themes Emerged from the Homeless Former Prisoners

The findings garnered from homeless former prisoners' coping strategies were categorised into three dimensions, namely problem-solving-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-focused. Relevant sub-themes of each dimension were delineated to facilitate deeper understanding levels of the coping strategies implemented in addressing, reducing, or adapting to exigent situations on the streets. A combination of the coping strategies by homeless former prisoners was also discovered to be executed in acclimatising to street life vicissitudes. Homeless subsistence did not prevent homeless former prisoners from continuing their life journey by employing coping strategies to adapt to challenging life conditions on the streets, as analysed from former prisoners' positive and negative experiences. Simultaneously, homeless former prisoners were impelled to execute perilous approaches to generate income via purloining, prostitution, or drug vending, the last approach of which was highly preferred by homeless former prisoners.

Superordinate Theme 1: Problem-Solving-Focused Coping Strategies

The first superordinate theme with three sub-themes emerging from the findings was apropos of problem-solving-focused coping strategies employed by former prisoners subsisting on the streets.

Sub-theme 1A: Endeavour in self-enhancement

Several homeless former prisoner informants conveyed that they frequently attempted to improve themselves through different methods of the problem-solving-focused coping mechanisms, especially the strategies in higher income generation.

Before going to bed, I will try to think of ways to earn money. That always is. It's just that we lack support. I'm always looking for ways to improve myself. (Khairil, Informant 3)

I always try to find a way to improve myself, like seeking a better job. Look for anything that can earn income. (Ikram, Informant 24)

Sub-theme 1B: Capable of income generation

Homeless former prisoners employed problem-solving-focused coping strategies by perceiving themselves as possessing the competence to generate remuneration from productive activities or available jobs in reducing subsistence problems. Nevertheless, high difficulty levels existed amongst former prisoners in seeking stable employment due to personal criminal records and societal stigmas. Notwithstanding, the former prisoners were not hindered by the obstacles to enhancing their living conditions.

I think I can still work with my strength. I will do any work to make sure I can get income. So I can buy whatever I want. (Nizam, Informant 4)

I will find resources, money, and jobs even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though it was more difficult to get a job, I still do whatever I can during that time to gain money. I always like that. I like to make sure I have income. So I will not burden anyone. (Amirah, Informant 20)

Sub-theme 1C: Refusal to become mendicants

Several homeless former prisoners exhibited shame in performing begging activities, given their self-perception of adequate job competence in attaining emoluments and an eclectic variety of job opportunities. The shame perception was regarded as a problem-solving-focused coping strategy as the homeless former prisoners preferred personal efforts of subsistence over mendicancy for alms.

Because not all the jobs that I do are suitable. Sometimes, the feeling of being embarrassed is like asking for money from people, so I don't want to. There are many jobs that can contribute financially. (Nizam, Informant 4)

I never beg because I have self-esteem; I will do business to support my own life. (Zainudin, Informant 26)

Superordinate Theme 2: Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies

Emotion-focused coping strategies focus on succouring individuals by relieving negative emotions arising from the encountered stressors through pertinent alterations in frames of reference for every challenging experience or situation. Particularly, emotion-focused coping mechanisms regulate negative emotional reactions to stress, such as anxiety, trepidation, melancholy, and indignation, when stressful events are inevitable or problem-solving-focused coping strategies cannot eliminate the stressors. The results demonstrated that the majority of the homeless former prisoners were less predisposed towards emotion-focused coping strategies, which were considered impractical in resolving life challenges or producing intangible outcomes.

Sub-theme 2A: Rampage amidst frustration

The findings revealed a high proclivity amongst homeless former prisoners to exhibit indignation when being frustrated, owing to highly difficult living conditions. The behavioural manifestation was aimed to relieve the frustration feeling which existed amidst encountering life hardships.

Indeed, I also use this thing. People say I'm raging, the emotions in me when I'm addicted, or I don't have anything when I don't have money. When I do that thing, I will have money, there's no problem with the community or with friends. (Sofian, Informant 1)

I used to use emotions with rage because I felt disappointed in myself when dealing with the situation. (Mahmood, Informant 23)

Sub-theme 2B: Ineffective emotions in problem-solving

When probed on the emotion manifested in problem-solving, three homeless former prisoner informants conveyed that the emotion was ineffective. Various circumstances experienced by the homeless former prisoners demonstrated that emotions, such as rage or wrath, could not reduce or tackle the problems when subsisting on the streets.

I don't see it as a solution. Since by getting angry or emotional, it wouldn't fix my problem on the street. (Sofian, Informant 1)

It's not appropriate to use emotions even though life is painful every day. I rarely used this in making any action. (Khairil, Informant 3)

I think the use of emotions is inappropriate because I can control without having to use emotions. It will not solve problems, and, in fact, I will cause more problems. (Cheng, Informant 22)

Sub-theme 2C: Anger avoidance

Homeless former prisoners also mentioned avoiding outrage when handling personal sentiments and resolving life challenges. The exhibition of frustration via anger due to life hardships was perceived as unbefitting conduct by the homeless former prisoner informant. The notion demonstrated that homeless former prisoners were less inclined to employ emotion-focused coping strategies, either positively or negatively, to encounter adverse circumstances.

I will never again give in to anger. I think I gave up to win, what's wrong, I gave up. It doesn't suit me, I don't behave like that. (Nizam, Informant 4)

Because I'm disappointed, my life has never been angry because I chose this path. If I'm angry because I have to cheat with a friend, a friend cheats on money and promises. So I don't think anger can fix my problem. (Daniel, Informant 6)

I don't use emotions in solving problems. It will not be going to settle any of my problems on this street. I never use this. (Zainudin, Informant 26)

Superordinate Theme 3: Avoidance-Focused Coping Strategies

Avoidance-focused coping strategies encompass efforts to avoid stress from existing when tackling different hurdles of subsisting vagrantly by homeless former prisoners. Although stress avoidance may assist in effectively channelling negative feelings externally, the effects are equivocal. As discovered from the homeless former prisoners, direct engagement with the stressors or exasperation sources was more effective in reducing stress levels than avoiding the root causes. Homeless former prisoners preferred the employment of avoidance strategies due to the effortless procedure to suppress relevant thoughts and situations which engendered anxiety originally. Nevertheless, the avoidance-focused coping mechanism would exacerbate the condition in the long term.

Sub-theme 3A: Drug abuse to mitigate frustration

Homeless former prisoners generally abused drugs or narcotics as one of the coping strategies to attenuate their frustration, which was regarded as effective in providing tranquillity when situated in exasperating circumstances. Moreover, substance abuse was considered a painless avenue in achieving equanimity with temporary pleasure induction, as opposed to robbery and pilfering activities which would create ensuing complications. The ephemeral evasion of life tribulations through drug abuse led the homeless former prisoners to employ multiple avoidance-focused coping strategies.

Yes, one. We can say focus on work. Okay for me, that's it. We feel the problem is gone. We take the drug when we feel like we want to rest, the magic appears when we take this drug. (Khairil, Informant 3)

I did stupid things. If I'm stressed, I want to take drugs. I think it helps me not to think about my disappointment in life. Drugs can also make me forget about what is happening. (Laila, Informant 30)

Sub-theme 3B: Drugs prohibited undirected thoughts

Drug abuse was also revealed to reduce aimless thoughts, specifically the current obstacles encountered by homeless former prisoners. Through substance abuse, the living challenges on the streets could be momentarily neglected by the former prisoners, therefore promoting further drug abuse due to the provisional benefit.

Drugs make me forget about things which are not important in life. Living on the streets, you tend to face a lot of problems. So, when I take drugs, I tend to forget about the problem. (Nizam, Informant 4)

The problem disappears for a moment when we take drugs. (Solleh, Informant 16)

At first, I took this ice for medical reasons, because we have no one, no social support. When I take drugs, I will forget my problem on the streets. (Ikram, Informant 24)

Sub-theme 3C: Indefinite solitude

The homeless former prisoners were also unveiled to elude into personal solitude by remaining silent instead of mingling with their counterparts. Personal solitude was perceived as one of the coping strategies employed by former prisoners when subsisting on the streets. Owing to recurrent life hurdles with tremendous stress

levels, the homeless former prisoners required personal solitude indefinitely to regain composure amidst the encountered hardships.

I didn't do anything, I took methadone in the morning and then, as usual, I like to be alone. (Daniel, Informant 6)

I used to isolate myself and don't want to see friends. (Mahmood, Informant 23)

Sub-theme 3D: Prolonged sleep

Homeless formerly incarcerated individuals were frequently discovered to continuously sleep for a prolonged period on the streets to avoid constant recollection of negative events when subsisting vagrantly. Prolonged sleep was one of the coping strategies which emphasised avoidance of real-life complications. The attempt to escape the difficult reality was believed to generate interim peace of mind to the suffocating problems experienced on the streets.

When I'm too stressed with life, I sleep a lot from thinking about the state of life. (Luqman, Informant 12)

There are also situations where I will choose to sleep. I feel more relieved after sleep. (Mahmood, Informant 23)

Sub-theme 3E: Performing worship rituals

Several former prisoner informants responded that they performed worship rituals as a method to achieve inner peace. The action was enlightening as subsistence on the streets did not impede homeless former prisoners' efforts in searching for composure via religious beliefs. The momentary inner peace was categorised as an avoidance-focused coping strategy when the homeless former prisoners revered the deities or divine beings of their religions to mitigate the emerging feeling of vexation.

Every day I will pray, I feel calmer, I can feel in my own heart, pray for a calm life. It will help me to deal with my problem on the streets. (Cheng, Informant 22)

I will choose to recite prayers and Yassin. I think it is one way of reducing my stress and disappointment. I will feel less stressed when I perform worship. (Yusuf, Informant 27)

DISCUSSION

The coping strategies employed by homeless former prisoners were examined in the present study and delineated as a process of counteracting life hardships while accommodating vagrancy subsistence. Lazarus and Folkman (1984a) defined stress as recurrent cognitive and behavioural efforts in managing internal and external demands that extend beyond personal capabilities. Coping strategies are regularly influenced by the respective cultural backgrounds, personal experiences in resolving problems, environmental factors, personalities, and self-concepts. Essentially, coping strategies are thoughts and actions on stress by consciously utilising available resources from personal competence or environmental elements to reduce conflicts while enhancing well-being. Meanwhile, action forces could be defined as a transaction executed by an individual to overcome internal and external stipulations which interfere with personal survival. Action strategies endeavour to eliminate oppressive stress and demands which are perceived to consume exceedingly large amounts of or beyond available expedients. The availability of resources possessed by an individual will significantly affect the subsequent implementation of relevant action strategies.

Conway and Terry (1992) divided the existing coping strategies into three approaches. First, the ego process to lessen emotional tension; second, the execution of the fundamentals of a trait. Nonetheless, the two approaches did not consider the presence of a stressful situation was frequently dynamic as the event was not a static event due to the variance of subjective experiences. Meanwhile, the third approach complemented the shortcomings of the former approaches by regarding action force as a dynamic process. Coping mechanisms exist in two general forms, either emotion-focused or problem-solving-focused. Emotion-focused coping strategies emphasise internally emerging emotional states as opposed to external conditions in triggering emotional responses, particularly when there is a shortage of relevant efforts in altering perilous, menacing, or exigent environmental situations. Such a form of action may occur when conditions are judged suitable for a change. Lazarus and Folkman (1984a) propounded that the emotion-focused coping strategies included denial or rejection, escape-avoidance, accepting responsibility or self-blame, exercising self-control on thoughts and demeanours related to the current situations, and engaging in positive assessment by seeking a positive resolution. Separately, problem solving-focused approaches concentrated on problem-solving by learning additional skills, searching for alternative satisfaction channels, and developing innovative behavioural standards. The two coping approaches were revealed to be the most frequent choice when responding to stressful events (Folkman and Lazarus 1985; LaCourse et al. 2019), which was also concurrently affected by subjective cognitive appraisal during the selection of pertinent action

forces. Folkman et al. (1986) suggested that the coping aspect required deliberate consideration owing to the interconnection with corresponding situations before implementing psychological adjustment.

In the current study, homeless former prisoners were positioned in a vulnerable situation arising from the difficulty in securing shelter, unemployment, family rejection, drug abuse, and penurious living conditions. The study identified three categories of coping strategies employed by homeless former prisoners when encountering stressful situations. For example, problem-solving-focused coping strategies allowed homeless former prisoners to execute a highly systematic approach to minimise the emerging frustration when experiencing big challenges in securing a stable job, locating affordable accommodation, and improving familial relationships to halt subsistence life on the streets. Meanwhile, emotion-focused coping methods enabled homeless former prisoners to apply emotion-based behavioural methods. In comparison, avoidance-focused techniques would engender homeless former prisoners to become highly isolated from the public and proceed with prolonged sleep to ephemerally avoid the emergence of frustration and stress. Avoidant coping is associated with suicidal/self-harm ideation in men, and this relationship is mediated by male-type depressive symptoms (O’Gorman et al. 2022). An extensive range of challenges existed when subsisting vagrantly, which generated a tremendous amount of stress for the homeless former prisoners. Specifically, this study examined three forms of coping strategies employed by homeless former prisoners when subsisting on the streets, which recurrently pose numerous hardships. Vagrancy subsistence continually teems with trials and tribulations, which requires homeless former prisoners to develop personal coping skills to counteract the negative effects of unfavourable life events. The coping skills encompass behavioural, cognitive, and emotional aspects to attune to the volatile circumstances on the streets. Thus, the findings provided detailed insights regarding the resolutions of homeless former prisoners in subsisting a homeless life.

Substance abuse was revealed to be the negative consequence of being homeless and not the cause. Homeless former prisoners regularly perceived drugs as a coping approach to tackling life complications on the streets. Specifically, drug abuse was aimed at and endeavoured to acquire temporary relief from unceasing life problems. Inversely, drug abuse exacerbated the existing problems and diminished personal capacity to attain employment stability and forfeiting street life. Moreover, drug abuse was moderately considered to be acceptable among homeless communities (Didenko and Pankratz 2007), as drugs were perceived to offer an ephemeral escape from a depressed state induced by personal agony and agitation. Besides, peer pressure was also a contributing factor to the increasing addiction rate among

homeless former prisoners. A majority of the homeless former prisoners regarded drug abuse as the only gateway to the acceptance of the homeless community, while they were not cognisant of the negative ramifications of the practice, including higher difficulty levels of indigence removal and perpetual sustaining of the homelessness state.

Accordingly, drug intake as a coping strategy is preferred as part of the current lifestyle for self-treatment, which generates provisional advantages amongst homeless former prisoners, such as pain relief, mood alleviation, sleep encouragement, and enforced mental anaesthesia against irrepressible stress. Drug abuse predilection was enhanced when accessibility to various narcotics was eased for personal consumption and amongst mutual counterparts. Subsequently, the unremitting action without appropriate interventions would engender habituation, which could be permanent in a lifetime. Achieving and maintaining optimism in the face of hardships is a complicated process for every individual, and the process is further encumbered for homeless former prisoners who do not possess high accessibility levels to affordable and sheltered accommodation. Particularly, a homeless former prisoner requires high levels of support, safety, and motivation to halt drug abuse. Nonetheless, homelessness is a proximate issue when daily survival conveys pressing demands, which pose an ultimate factor contributing to the drug intake as temporary suffering mitigation. To ensure personal survival, various means of remuneration generation to secure a stable shelter are more crucial than the offer of drug abuse treatment. In addition, several homeless former prisoners explicated that access to narcotics was more unchallenging than seeking employment or safe accommodation. On the streets, drugs would be more effortlessly available than opportunities received by homeless former prisoners to improve their living conditions. With the high narcotic accessibility on the streets combined with the stress and anxiety due to vagrancy subsistence, the homeless former prisoners would be predisposed to resorting to drugs as an avoidance-focused coping strategy, which further aggravated their situations, especially when accessing medical treatments required to remove their addictions.

The present study postulated that the coping strategies adopted by homeless former prisoners when encountering stressors could be significantly different than those employed by the general population, owing to divergent contemporary living conditions (Opalach et al. 2016). By conducting relevant interviews with the formerly incarcerated individuals who were currently subsisting on the streets, this study determined the coping strategies preferred by the homeless former prisoners to counteract the negative life circumstances. Due to multiple challenges, such as job insecurity, lack of shelter and a social support system, the constant stress when surviving on the streets produced significant repercussions on the homeless

former prisoners while impeding their future abilities to enhance their current living conditions.

CONCLUSION

An eclectic variety of coping strategies exist to be implemented by homeless former prisoners, and several approaches were discovered to be more effective than others, depending on the nature of the stressful situations and individuals applying actions. Several former prisoners strived to improve their living conditions, whereas certain counterparts perceived and accepted that street life was a predetermined destiny. Nevertheless, the results demonstrated the existence of similarities in the selection of coping strategies amongst the homeless former prisoners. Besides, similar environmental conditions encountered by the homeless former prisoners engendered homogenous coping strategies with corresponding rationales. Promoting the adoption of effective coping strategies among homeless who are experiencing difficult times can help to improve their life survival.

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