

COPING STRATEGIES USED DURING EXAMINATION PERIODS AMONG FINAL-YEAR ALLIED HEALTH UNDERGRADUATES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

PLAA Sathsarani¹, LGS Kavindya¹, SMPNAB Abhayarathna¹, KLKTD Sandharenu¹, AWMKK Bandara² and
NFJ Fernando³

Department of Nursing & Midwifery, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence¹
University, Werahara, Sri Lanka¹

Department of Basic Sciences, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence
University, Sri Lanka²

Department of Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri
Lanka³

ABSTRACT

The unique combination of academic and clinical coursework often leads to high levels of stress among undergraduates. Due to a demanding curriculum, clinical placements, and multiple evaluations, Allied Health undergraduates are frequently subjected to a higher level of stress than students in other programs, which may induce anxiety and depression. Recognizing the need for improved stress management and academic outcomes, this research sought to deepen the understanding of coping processes that could help students manage stress more effectively. The study aimed to explore the coping strategies used during the examination period among a group of final-year Allied Health undergraduates. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed. Thirty-five in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected final-year Allied Health Science undergraduates. The interviews were analysed thematically to identify patterns and insights. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee, Faculty of Medicine, Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU). Data collection was strengthened by triangulating methods, including interviews and field notes taken during the interviews, and extended engagement with the participants. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved. The study included thirty-five participants aged 22 to 27 years old. Most of the participants were female, and all were Sinhalese in nationality. Findings revealed four key themes: maladaptive coping strategies, adaptive coping strategies, social support, and avoidant coping strategies. Participants reported a range of coping strategies, such as substance use, venting, giving up, positive reframing, acceptance, planning, self-distraction, and support seeking in dealing with stressors during the examination period. The findings show that many participants used adaptive coping strategies, while some adapted maladaptive or avoidant coping behaviours. The findings provide valuable insights into the coping strategies used by final-year Allied Health undergraduates during examination periods and suggest strengthening student support programmes that promote adaptive coping strategies to achieve better academic outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Final year undergraduates, coping strategies, stress, period of examination

Corresponding Author: KLKTD Sandharenu email: tharanisanda@kdu.ac.lk



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5485-6988>



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1. INTRODUCTION

Stress is defined as a relationship involving an individual and the environment, which the individual perceives as demanding or beyond his or her available resources. It is identified as a physiological and psychological response to a stressor that is perceived as difficult to adequately cope with (Labrague, 2024). Stress may appear through physical, emotional, and behavioural changes, and its severity depends on how people perceive it and the coping strategies they use (Black Thomas, 2021; Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2021).

University education plays a key role in developing the skills and attitudes of students as well as providing pathways for future employment (Kavishka Puhulwella Hewage and Lakmal Ponnampereuma, 2023). In recent years, stress has become a significant public health concern among university students (Feng, Ma and Pan, 2026; Setegn Fentahun et al., 2025), and globally, the prevalence of stress among health science students has been reported to range from 30% to 94% (Awoke et al., 2021). However, it is noted that not every undergraduate responds to stressful situations in the same way. Some students respond positively and continue to function well despite stress, while others experience emotional difficulties. Although stress is seen as harmful, a moderate level of stress may motivate, help build resilience, and help the students to perform better (Li and Hasson, 2020; Lin et al., 2020). Managing stress throughout university life can be extremely difficult for most students, especially young adults, who often struggle to cope with life. They consider stress a negative experience, use ineffective coping mechanisms, and struggle to find resources to help them deal with problems.

Previous research consistently shows that perceived stress is common among university students, and students' insights of high stress levels have also been linked to low academic performance, reduced educational success, poor sleep, depression, dropout, and vital health issues (Monira Alwhaibi, Alotaibi and Alsaadi, 2023; Urbanowicz et al., 2023; Shambhu, 2026). Therefore, learning to cope with stress may help undergraduates to cope with everyday social, psychological, and academic challenges, resulting in a

better university experience (Waterhouse and Samra, 2025).

Coping strategies are the specific tools, both psychological and behavioural mechanisms, used to tolerate, control, reduce, or anticipate stressful events (Chaabane et al., 2021). Effective coping strategies help undergraduates adapt to stressful situations, whereas ineffective coping strategies may worsen stress and its negative effects (Peiris et al., 2021). Final-year undergraduate students of Allied Health Sciences are often exposed to higher levels of academic stress when compared to other undergraduates, owing to tight academic schedules, clinical placements, research, and various examinations, which may cause anxiety and depression (Abed and Abd El-Raouf, 2021; Shawahna et al., 2020). Their education requires them to manage heavy coursework, engage in written examinations, viva, practical exams, and clinical exams, compared to other academic years, which leads to high levels of academic stress. In addition to these educational demands, many students also face personal challenges such as financial difficulties, limited time for rest, and maintaining relationships with family and friends (Russell et al., 2025). Importantly, when it comes to the examination period, this stress level will be higher than ever. This may increase the risk of burnout and reduce the quality of care they provide as future healthcare professionals. Students use different methods to cope with their stress. Some adopt positive coping strategies such as effective time management, seeking support from family, friends, or peers, and practicing mindfulness techniques for better emotional well-being, while others rely on less effective maladaptive coping methods such as avoidance and substance use that may worsen their stress (Friday et al., 2023; Herman, Reinke and Eddy, 2020).

There are numerous studies conducted to examine interventions designed to reduce stress among university students (Amanvermez et al., 2022; Petley et al., 2021). However, they provide limited information about the different coping strategies employed by the students. Therefore, more comprehensive evidence is needed to understand the coping behaviours reported by students through

surveys and qualitative research (Waterhouse and Samra, 2025). Also, in the Sri Lankan context, previous studies have reported high levels of stress among undergraduates and identified various coping strategies used to manage academic and clinical demands (Thilakarathna and Kisokanth, 2022; Atheef and Rathnayake, 2025; Thusthika Arulnayakamoorthy and Nishani Chathurika Jagodage, 2026).

Despite this available evidence, there is limited qualitative research conducted focusing specifically on final-year allied health undergraduates during examination periods, particularly in the Sri Lankan context. Most available studies are quantitative and do not provide an in-depth understanding of how the students manage their stress during the examination period (T. H. M. Kauashani and Eranthi Weeratunga, 2023; Peiris et al., 2021). Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to address this gap by examining coping strategies during the period of examination within the final year of Allied Health undergraduates. This helps to gain a more in-depth understanding of the coping mechanisms adopted by undergraduate students during the examination period.

The findings of this study help to identify the coping strategies students commonly use, which can help universities develop support services that better match students' needs and preferences and inspire other students to use them to successfully manage stress while improving their academic success and overall well-being. This strengthens students' resilience and prepares them for their future professional roles (Onieva-Zafra et al., 2020).

2. METHODOLOGY

Research design and participant recruitment

A descriptive qualitative approach was used to hear the views and lived experiences and to gain a better understanding of coping strategies adopted by the final year Allied Health undergraduates during the examination period (Doyle et al., 2020; Villamin et al., 2024).

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Allied Health Sciences (FAHS), General Sir John Kotelawala

Defense University (KDU), Werahera, Sri Lanka, targeting Final-year Allied Health Sciences students pursuing BSc in Physiotherapy, Nursing, Medical Laboratory Sciences, Radiography and Radiotherapy, and B Pharm degree programmes.

All the final year BSc. Undergraduates registered at FAHS, KDU were included in the study, while the undergraduates who did not provide consent to participate in the study were excluded. Final-year Allied Health Science students were selected as they have more examination components, including written examinations, viva, practical exams, and clinical exams, compared to other academic years.

The purposive sampling technique was applied to recruit participants who could provide in-depth, rich and detailed information to answer the research question based on the researcher's judgement (Gill, 2020; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

Once the potential participants were identified, an information sheet was provided to the participants and written informed consent was obtained before commencing the interviews. The consent form included permission to audio record the interviews and use the transcribed verbatim for research purposes.

Data collection

A short interviewer-administered questionnaire was used to obtain socio-demographic information such as age, gender, religion etc. Information on coping strategies utilized by the undergraduate students was gathered using semi-structured interviews facilitated by a guide. The interview guide was designed in line with the objectives of the study, based on the student researcher and supervisors' knowledge and expertise in the research area, and the available literature (Roberts, 2020). The interview guide was tested with the supervisor, and the student researcher did some role-plays with a final-year Allied Health Science student in a convenient setting to identify any unclear or ambiguous questions and to practice the interview skills (Villamin et al., 2024; Roberts, 2020).

The main data collection method of this research was face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Each interview was conducted for about 30 to 40 minutes. The data collection was done before the period of examination for 3 months from the initial

recruitment of participants (August- October 2022) until it was judged that saturation was achieved (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022).

Each interview was conducted at the faculty premises without hindrance to other academic activities by the student researcher in the Sinhala language. The questions were organized to give participants the flexibility and freedom to dive deeper into their ideas. Throughout the interview, open-ended questions and probing questions were used to encourage participants to answer efficiently, freely, and openly (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent from the beginning to ensure a full transcript. Specific points were documented in the researcher's field notes and allowed the researcher to document essential points to refer to later in the interview, during transcribing, and during data analysis. Further, after each interview, the student researcher wrote her reflections and observations made during the interviews.

After each interview, the student researcher listened to the audio recording and transcribed it verbatim the same day. The interviews were continued until it was judged that data saturation had been reached (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). That is by the 32nd interview, when no new information was brought by participants during the interviews, and the same information was repeated. The researcher chose to interview three more participants to check that data saturation was reached and that no extra information was needed. In total, thirty-five interviews were conducted. Participants were purposively recruited from different Allied Health Sciences degree programmes as all participants shared the common experience of coping with final-year examinations. This study aimed to explore coping strategies among final-year Allied Health undergraduates as a single group, rather than to compare differences between degree programmes, and they were considered as a homogenous group in terms of their shared academic context and experience of the examination period. However, no interviews had to be halted or postponed since no student displayed evidence of mental distress throughout the interview.

Data analysis

The socio-demographic data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 software. Simple descriptive statistics were used to interpret the findings.

The qualitative data obtained through the interviews were prepared for analysis as follows. The student researcher transcribed all audio-recorded interviews. Listening to the audio recordings and referring to the field notes helped them to familiarize themselves with the data. Each transcript was read line by line several times to be familiar with the data. Data analysis was commenced in parallel to the data collection process (Villamin et al., 2024).

Once the interviews were transcribed into written form, the identifiable information (e.g. names, places) in the transcripts was removed and anonymised (using pseudonyms), and these anonymised versions were used for data analysis. Each participant was assigned a number to maintain information confidentiality, and the quotes were recorded using the numbers as P1, P2, P3, P4....., P35.

All transcriptions were in the same language as the interviews were carried out (i.e., Sinhala). The data analysis was carried out in line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step thematic analysis method. The six steps described are 1) read the transcript line-by-line to become familiar with the data; 2) initial coding; 3) searching for themes; 4) evaluating themes; 5) identifying and labelling themes, and 6) producing the research report. Before coding, each transcript was read several times. This allowed the researcher to get more familiar with the data's breadth and depth, allowing for the detection of possible patterns. After that, the first set of codes was created. Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify repeated patterns across the data. Each idea was assigned a color code, which was then applied to pieces of data that shared the same concepts. After that, each code was developed by copying data extracts from each transcript. Next, we looked for themes that the codes had identified. The student researcher selected words from the data that best represented each group's main ideas. These words were then reviewed and grouped into clusters of similar ideas. This process continued

until each group's idea was clear and different from the others. The study's findings came from this process, linking similar ideas together to create broader themes. Finally, themes were created by gathering similar codes and grouping them together (Polit and Beck, 2021). Similar sub-themes were then combined to form larger, integrated themes (Polit and Beck, 2021). The needed information, such as codes, themes, subthemes, and relevant quotes, was translated into English.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee, Faculty of Medicine, KDU ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and strict confidentiality protocols.

Rigor and trustworthiness

The data collection method was triangulated by including interviews and field notes during interviews and extended engagement with the participants to ensure the credibility of the study results. Also, the same interviewer (student researcher) conducted all the interviews. The participants generously shared their lived experiences. Raw transcription data, purposive sampling technique, reflective notes, topic guideline, and data analysis were all properly documented, which enhanced the reliability of the findings. Confirmability was obtained through maintaining a reflexive diary by the interviewer to maintain reflexivity. Reflexivity enabled the researcher to be more aware of personal perspectives and experiences that may have an impact on the study process (Johnson, Adkins and Chauvin, 2020; Polit and Beck, 2021) The study's transferability was achieved through guaranteeing data saturation and providing detailed explanations. Further, as the researcher was a student within the same institution, this may influence the responses of the participants. To reduce the potential biases, the researcher-maintained neutrality and confidentiality and encouraged participants to freely express their ideas.

3. RESULTS

Socio-demographic information

The study included 35 final-year Allied Health Science undergraduates. The study participants were between 22 to 27 years old, with a mean and standard

deviation of 24.54 ± 1.221 . Most of the participants were female (68.6%). 91.4% of the sample were Buddhist. Many of the participants were from nuclear families (80%).

Coping Strategies of the Students

The thematic analysis of interviews uncovered the four themes, namely, maladaptive coping strategies, adaptive coping strategies, social coping strategies, and avoidance coping strategies. Each of these four themes is described in turn below.

Theme 1: Maladaptive coping strategies

Maladaptive coping strategies refer to ineffective ways people try to deal with stress. Engaging in these behaviours may offer brief relief, but they frequently exacerbate underlying distress.

Sub theme 1.1: Substance use

Only a few respondents stated that they used to engage in cigarette smoking during the exam period as a method of relieving examination stress. The most common substance used by male respondents to cope with exam stress during the exam period is cigarette smoking. They described it as a temporary relief from stress and to regain focus on the study. Other than the cigarette, we found nothing else. None of the female respondents reported using any other substances to ease exam stress.

One participant explained:

"I use around 2 to 3 cigarettes per day, during the exam period.. after having that, I feel chill to study again and never feel sleepy during the study time"
(P-08)

Sub theme 1.2: Self-blame/ venting/ self-criticising

The participants reported several emotional reactions, such as having a habit of blaming themselves, blaming others, and expressing frustration due to the stress they are experiencing during exams.

Some participants reported venting their stress by expressing anger towards external factors, such as lecturers and a heavy workload.

One participant stated:

"Sometimes, my friend and I shout and blame the lecturers for giving us a heavy workload and difficult exam papers. After doing that, I feel relaxed..." (P-12)

The verbal expression of frustration indicates a temporary relief from the stress they are experiencing.

A few participants appeared to be expressing self-blame and self-criticism due to unpreparedness for the exam, reflecting negative feelings towards themselves.

One participant stated:

"Sometimes I blame myself for not studying well, not completing the notes, and for not doing papers before the exam day..." (P-11)

Sub theme 1.3: Giving up

Some participants chose to avoid stressful situations by making false excuses, showing they were willing to be dishonest to reduce their stress, anxiety, and pressure associated with academic performance.

One participant shared:

"One day before (name) module, I felt that I couldn't get an A pass for the module, because at that time we had exams continuously, so I skipped the exam and made a medical for that module" (P-17)

This shows that skipping the exam may have provided temporary relief from stress or anxiety.

This indicates a short-term coping strategy to reduce stress.

Theme 2: Adaptive coping strategies

This theme describes the techniques or behaviours that individuals use to manage and cope with stress in a way that is effective and beneficial for their overall well-being.

Sub theme 2.1: Positive reframing

Several participants changed the way of interpreting the situations as a way of managing exam-related stress.

Some participants viewed the exam as just one part of the broader academic journey and emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive and refreshing mindset during exam periods.

One participant explained:

"I usually don't talk to anyone about my stress. Instead, I close my door, play songs on my JBL... and relax. I try to calm myself and think positively. Then I can start studying again with a fresh mind." (P-11)

Participants seek out study groups, friends, family members, or mentors who can provide positive reinforcement and support during exam periods and avoid people with negative minds who may try to bring them down.

Participants shared:

"This is really hard, but I am still going to give it my best and my closest friends also motivate me to hold the exam pressure to gain good results for the exams." (P-09)

"I usually be with my close friend during the exam period, because she is very positive about the exams and she always motivate me to study hard for the exams, and I try to avoid talking to others, because talking to some of others makes me uncomfortable" (P-13)

Participants described how they coped with stress during the exam period by using cognitive strategies such as expressing gratitude and reframing challenges. They emphasized that these strategies helped to maintain positivity.

"I'm increasing my gratitude for the things I love" (P-17).

"I've given up my freedom for a good purpose" (P-11).

Sub theme 2.2: Self-control

Participants described self-control as an important coping mechanism to maintain focus during the examination period. In terms of self-control, many students choose to uninstall social media applications from their phones during exam periods to help them focus on their studies.

One participant stated:

"During exams, I uninstall all social media apps from my phone to stay focused. I know they're distracting and annoying, so I control myself by avoiding them to prioritise my studies..." (P-13)

Sub theme 2.3: Acceptance

The majority of participants reported that sharing their experiences and openly acknowledging their stress with close friends, mothers, or siblings contributed to a sense of emotional relief.

One participant shared:

“When I was in my 2nd year, I had to face both the proper exam and the repeat exam in the same week. At that time, I was very stressed... I experienced a kind of panic situation about the exams. I suddenly went to my roommate's bedside and talked with him about what I was going through. After sharing the real situation, I felt a bit relieved.” (P-18)

Some participants initially felt skipping examinations as a way to find relief from stress. However, they ultimately decided that they would have to show up for the exams after accepting the consequences of avoiding them.

One participant explained:

“Many times I felt like skipping the exam, but then I realized that if I skip this time, I'll have to face both the repeat and the proper exams later, and that would be a huge content to cover. So, I decided to study well for the exam. After all, we came here to earn a degree, and for that, we must attend the exams and pass them all.” (P-32)

Sub theme 2.4: Planning

Planning was reported as a common coping mechanism to manage stress during the examination period. Most of the participants reported working according to a timetable as an effective time management method, which helps them to overcome stress. They mentioned that this helps to understand what they can realistically achieve with their time and make sure they have enough time for essential tasks.

One participant stated:

“If I have an exam, I usually create a timetable and allocate time for each subject. Sometimes I get distracted and can't follow it, so I make a new one that suits me better. I try to manage my time effectively.” (P-26)

However, a few reported that they have faced numerous challenges in following the timetable on time. The participants stated that they encounter difficulties in achieving a balance between their academic pursuits and daily activities in following the timetable on time.

One participant explained:

“Sometimes I struggle to stick to the timetable as I get distracted. If I find myself unable to follow the timetable, I usually create a new one to accommodate my schedule better. Ultimately, I aim to create a timetable that suits me and helps me manage my time effectively.” (P-26)

Participants reported working according to a timetable as an effective time management method, which helps them to overcome stress.

Others used digital tools such as mobile applications to support their planning which provided a sense of satisfaction.

One participant stated:

“I am using an application to manage my time. I create a to-do list and put a tick when a task is completed. At the end of the day, I feel happy when I have completed all the tasks on the list.” (P-16)

Sub theme 2.5: Physical activities

Many participants continued to engage in regular exercise and practice meditation and yoga, which helped them improve concentration and maintain a positive mindset, during examination periods.

Participants described:

“I used to do exercises during exam period less than 20 min, but when I felt more stress, I'd go for a run or exercises for 30 min until I sweat.” (P-33)

“I do yoga before I start studying in my exam time, it makes me fresh and comfortable and I usually won't feel stressed afterward... ” (P-11)

Sub theme 2.6: Comfort in religion

Most of the participants stated that they practice meditation when they feel stressed and uncomfortable. This helps them to calm their mind as well. Engage in spiritual activities, and religion can provide comfort,

support, and a sense of perspective during a challenging time.

One participant described:

"During the exam period, I practice 'Anapanasathi Bhawanawa' (Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation technique) for about 30 minutes or less using a video I downloaded. It helps calm my mind. I also worship Lord Buddha and seek blessings, relieves my stress and pressure." (P-05)

Few participants reported that worshipping in a temple makes individuals feel more supported and connected.

"Worshipping God made me forget about exam pressures and gives me comfort and strength to face exams." (P-17)

"I like to go to the temple during exams because it brings me a sense of happiness and strength. being in the temple also gives me a sense of peace to my heart and I stop thinking about my worries" (P-10)

Theme 03: Social support

This theme describes the concerns of participants regarding the support and encouragement they obtain from others, such as the lecturers, friends, and family, during the exam period.

Sub theme 3.1: Psychological support

Most of the participants responded that seeking mental health support provided a secure and supportive environment for them to deal with their stressors and boost their emotional well-being during the examination period.

Most of the participants reported that dealing with academic difficulties and personal challenges without familiar support systems can be a stressful experience.

They described that university counselling and mentoring services provided a secure and supportive environment for students to deal with their stressors and seek direction from mental health experts.

One participant explained:

"I get headaches and feel overwhelmed when I can't study, and sometimes I feel depressed. However, attending university counselling and mentoring sessions has been helpful." (P-21)

Sub theme 3.2: Family support

This sub-theme describes the concerns where students require encouragement and support from their family members for better academic engagement and emotional stability, particularly during the examination period. Most of the participants revealed that they received good family support during the period of examination.

Participants stated:

"When I feel overwhelmed during exams and often find myself crying, I reach out to my mother who offers encouragement and advice. Her words give me a boost of energy and I find it easier to study after talking to her....." (P-15)

"I feel overwhelmed during exams and often find myself crying, I turn to my family for support. My father is the only person who truly understands me" (P-21)

Sub theme 3.3: Peer support

This sub-theme describes the support required, indicating that having a trusted friend during difficult times can yield numerous benefits, such as decreased stress levels, improved mental health, and enhanced overall wellness to boost their emotional health and improve their academic performance.

Participants described:

"I turn to my best friend when I need help because she is a good counsellor and advisor. She knows me well, and when I get upset, I cry with her. She is a good listener and the best advisor." (P-11)

"My friends help me with my studies. They teach me lessons, share their notes, and organize teaching sessions for those who are weak in studies.. These sessions help me a lot during exam time. I truly believe I wouldn't be where I am today without their support." (P-28)

The participants stated that most of the time spent with friends helped alleviate the negative impact of stress caused by exams. Most of them collaborated with peers to study course materials and discuss study strategies, which enhanced their understanding of the material, increased their motivation to study, and provided opportunities for constructive feedback.

Theme 04: Avoidant coping

This sub- theme describes the strategies that are used to avoid or reduce stressful thoughts, feelings, or situations instead of dealing with the source of stress directly.

Participants reported several avoidant coping strategies to get temporary relief during the examination period.

Sub theme 4.1: Escape from reality

Most of the students mentioned that when they found themselves feeling overwhelmed with the pressure of exams, excessive internet surfing, and YouTube browsing as ways to escape from the stress. They felt that they provided temporary relief from stress and mental exhaustion.

Participants explained:

"I often use YouTube when I feel tired from working too much maybe due to stress. During exams, I enjoy discovering new things and searching for new information" (P-06)

"Sometimes when I feel overwhelmed with studying, I just scroll through Instagram or watch TikToks for hours. It helps me forget about the exam stress for a while."(P-05)

During this stressful exam time, some participants enjoyed spending time alone in nature, with pets, away from the distractions and demands of modern life.

One participant shared:

"I desire freedom. After studying and feeling exhausted, I go to the balcony and gaze at the sky. I enjoy drinking tea and observing the sky. When my eyes become tired from studying, I feed the fish. I also find pleasure in watching the fish tank." (P-34)

Several students had expressed that they had chosen to spend time alone in silence, which had proven to be an escape from reality.

"When I am stressed, I tend to become less talkative. I take some time for myself by being alone in my room and avoiding contact with others" (P-13)

Sub theme 4.2: Self-distraction/ distracting activities

Participants reported self-distraction as an avoidant coping strategy during the examination period

Most of the participants highlighted scrolling social media as an avoidant distraction method. They reported using social media and internet browsing to escape from exam stress, indicating a broader issue with procrastination and time management.

One participant stated:

"I scroll through Facebook just to keep myself distracted. I know I'm wasting time, but I do it to avoid thinking about the exams." (P-17)

A few participants reported that engaging with the outdoor environment could also help manage stress during stressful times. It is considered as a temporary escape from negative thoughts.

"When I am at home, I take a short walk in the garden. I enjoy observing flowers, as it has a calming effect on me and helps to reduce my stress from exams. There is a lake nearby my house, and I often pick lotus flowers from there..." (P-32)

4. DISCUSSION

This study provides a deeper understanding of the coping strategies employed by final-year Allied Health Science undergraduates in the FAHS, KDU, in dealing with stressors during the examination period.

Exams are considered a significant stressor for students, which could lead to emotional, psychological, and physical stress. Academic programs in the Allied Health Sciences are competitive and demanding, resulting in extensive study sessions for coursework, busy daily schedules, and intensive theoretical hours. The exam-related stress can also impact academic performance, resulting in poor grades and low academic achievement. Therefore, it is essential to employ coping strategies to manage and reduce exam stress.

The theme of maladaptive coping strategy describes the cognitive and behavioural efforts that may provide temporary relief and prevent individuals from adjusting, participating, or adapting in various aspects of life (Gautam et al., 2024). Substance use (smoking), self-blame/ venting and giving up are identified as maladaptive coping mechanisms to obtain temporary

relief from the academic pressures during exam periods. Within this environment, stress may lead to temporary withdrawal from academic activities. It is evident that they can worsen the psychological distress over time and are associated with poorer psychological outcomes (Indunil Karunarathna et al., 2024; Gurvich et al., 2020). Findings have been reported among nursing students who consume alcohol and sedative drugs as coping strategies to reduce psychological stress (Ahmed et al., 2022; Kariuki, 2026). However, the prevalence of substance use was low in the present study. This may be due to strong family influence, cultural values, and social expectations, particularly for female students. This is consistent with the findings of past studies, which indicate that only a small number of undergraduates reported engaging in risk behaviours such as use of alcohol and substance abuse (T. H. M. Kauashani and Eranthi Weeratunga, 2023; Taha Adawi and Slah Ben Fadhel, 2020). In addition, studies found that self-blame, behavioural disengagement, venting, and giving up are coping mechanisms that are associated with increased academic stress, poorer academic performance, and higher levels of psychological distress (Freire et al., 2020; Atheef and Rathnayake, 2025; Rodríguez et al., 2026). These behaviours may arise with the heavy pressure associated with workload and exams and provide temporary relief from stress. However, continuing these behaviours may lead to increased academic stress, poorer academic performance, and higher levels of psychological distress. Therefore, early identification of this coping mechanism is essential to prevent students from getting adverse mental health outcomes.

Techniques or behaviours that individuals used to manage or control stress in ways that were effective and beneficial for their overall psychological well-being were referred to as adaptive coping strategies (Myriam El Khoury-Malhame et al., 2024). Under this theme, religious comfort, positive reframing, self-control, acceptance, planning, and physical activities were identified as the adaptive coping strategies. During exam periods, adaptive coping strategies were particularly important for students as they could help them manage the anxiety and stress related to academic performance. Current study revealed that engaging in religious activities could help in stress

relief, develop a positive mindset, and train the mind to focus and concentrate on their studies and relieve their stress during the exam period (Božek, Nowak and Blukacz, 2020). This reflects the Sri Lankan culture where religious beliefs and engaging in spiritual activities provide relief during stressful periods. Praying and meditating help students to feel calmer during the stressful examination period. Similar to the present study findings, past studies found that undergraduates employ acceptance, active coping, religion, and planning as adaptive coping strategies to manage stressful situations and report better psychological well-being (Rogowska, Kuśnierz and Bokszczanin, 2020; T. H. M. Kauashani and Eranthi Weeratunga, 2023; Awoke et al., 2021; Rijal et al., 2023; Chaaya et al., 2025). Also, the current study depicted that gratitude and reframing helped students enhance their well-being and cope more effectively with exam-related stress. It helps people think and act in more positive ways and encourages students to be more engaged in their studies (Zhen et al., 2019). Thus, the use of adaptive coping mechanisms helps undergraduate students, including those in health science, to manage their stress effectively with better physical health outcomes (de la Fuente et al., 2020; Moxham et al., 2022).

The present study reported that the provision of comfort, care, and empathy by friends, family, or peers helps an individual cope with stressful situations. It involved the expression of understanding and concern, which could help reduce negative emotions such as fear, sadness, and anxiety and improve academic performance. This reflects the cultural influence of Sri Lanka, where family bonds and relationships are highly valued. The emotional support and encouragement received from family members improve the confidence and emotional well-being of students during stressful examination periods. Similar studies have found that social support, including family relationships, is a good coping strategy among undergraduates, which was associated with lower levels of exam stress (Li et al., 2021; Rohanachandra et al., 2021). Despite identifying that university counselling services and mentoring are useful support mechanisms, some students are reluctant to use professional support services. Also, Thusthika Arulnayakamoorthy and Nishani

Chathurika Jagodage (2026) noted that they are the least used strategies. These findings suggest that the lack of awareness and social stigma associated with professional support, especially in South Asian countries, are the main reasons for this.

Avoidant coping mechanisms such as self-distraction and escape from reality were identified in the present study to avoid or reduce stressful thoughts and emotional reactions. Most of our participants used to listen to songs and sing songs to relieve their stress during the exam period. Music can be used to stimulate the nervous system in the body, as well as provide a sense of relaxation and help them forget about their worries during the exam period. Similar to the present findings, undergraduates employed distraction methods such as listening to music, watching movies/television series, reading, and sleeping as avoidance coping mechanisms to minimize the psychological issues (Rogowska, Kuśnierz and Bokszczanin, 2020; Weeraratna et al., 2022). These types of stress-relieving strategies show an attempt to regulate emotional behaviours associated with stress. Conversely, few students revealed that social media could have a detrimental effect on academic performance and removing it from their phones could help them prioritize their studies and avoid distractions. However, more than 2/3 of the research participants used social media as a coping tool during their exam period, despite knowing it was a waste of time, which made them struggle to focus during the examination. Similarly, the effectiveness of coping with social media was discussed in a other study (Wolfers, 2022). In Sri Lanka, university students utilize social media not only as entertainment but also to keep in touch with their peers and to gain emotional support during the examination period. The findings suggest that students use social media as both a coping mechanism and a mode of distraction.

The study's findings serve to enable these coping mechanisms and inspire other students to use them to successfully manage stress. This study was conducted at a single university in Sri Lanka, involving different Allied health streams. In addition, there was only one time point for data collection in this study. This hinders our insight into how students experience progress and evolve.

5. CONCLUSION

Coping strategies are behavioural and cognitive methods used to manage stressful situations. The study found that participants used various coping strategies to deal with stress actively by finding solutions and reducing its cognitive, psychological, and physical effects. Most participants used positive coping skills, while a few relied on negative strategies. Therefore, it is recommended to use cognitive restructuring methods such as replacing negative thoughts with healthier, positive ones that reduce stress during the period of examination. The findings provide valuable insight into how students manage exam stress and can help them recognize and strengthen effective coping skills.

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