

# Coping Strategies of High-Achieving Students in Boarding Excellence High Schools: A Case Study

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## Abstract

This study aims to describe coping strategies for outstanding students in boarding high schools. The case study method was used to obtain an overview of students' coping strategies. An overview of coping strategies was obtained from three students who had the highest achievements in their class using thematic analysis. The results of the study revealed that students used various coping strategies in dealing with stressors, students used Emotion-Focused Coping to adapt to stressors and did Problem Focus Coping to overcome the problems they faced. This research reveals that with the right strategy, individuals can maintain their performance and deal with existing pressures both from within and from the environment.

**Keywords:** *Stress, Coping Strategy, Emotion Focus Coping, Problem Focus Coping, Case Study.*



## A. INTRODUCTION

High School (*Sekolah Menengah Atas*), according to Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia (PERMENDIKBUDRISTEK) No. 5 of 2022, is a formal educational institution with competency standards aimed at preparing students to become members of society who are faithful, pious, and have noble character; possess values aligned with Pancasila; and have the knowledge to enhance their competencies for further education. To achieve these competency standards, schools have the autonomy to design learning models tailored to their specific needs and goals.

Various types of schools are found across Indonesia, one of which is boarding schools. Based on a preliminary study conducted at the high school (SMA) that serves as the research location, it was found that boarding schools have a different learning environment compared to non-boarding schools. In boarding schools, students reside within the school environment, separated from their parents, with limited access to communication. This arrangement is intended to help students focus on their studies without distractions, such as gadgets. Students adhere to school regulations from the moment they wake up until they go to bed, aiming to cultivate discipline, piety, and noble character. Their interactions are limited to peers, teachers, and school staff, and students are not allowed to leave the boarding area without teacher supervision, typically granted once every three weeks.

In addition to the boarding life, students are required to follow formal education according to government standards for their grade level. The boarding high

school targeted in this research incorporates religious subjects into the formal curriculum alongside other academic subjects, resulting in students studying more subjects compared to other schools.

SMA X is categorized as an excellence high school due to its achievements in both academic and non-academic fields across various levels. Students are required to participate in at least one competition during their time at the school. Based on the 2022 LTMPT scores in the National Higher Education Entrance Test (UTBK), the school ranked 34th nationally and 4th provincially. The school's achievement standards go beyond passing the School Examination; over 90% of students are expected to gain admission to prestigious domestic or international universities. This has made the school an attractive option for parents who wish their children to pursue higher education abroad or at top domestic universities with popular majors.

From their first year of high school, students are introduced to practice questions for university entrance exams as part of their daily learning. Formal learning takes place from 7:00 AM to 3:30 PM. Teachers are available from morning until 10:00 PM to assist students with their studies. In the second year, students are required to complete a mini research project, which they must present to two examiners as a graduation requirement. By the third year, students' study hours are extended, with learning sessions starting at 5:00 AM and ending at 10:00 PM.

The higher demands placed by the school, compared to other schools, coupled with parents' expectations for academic excellence, can lead to pressure on students, potentially causing stress (Varma, 2023; Deepthi et al., 2024; Popa-Velea et al., 2021; Satayev, 2024). Preliminary data indicates that some students perceive these conditions as overwhelming and stressful. According to Lazarus (1993), situations that are assessed as exceeding an individual's resource capacity are termed as stressors, leading to feelings of pressure and a lack of well-being. These feelings are collectively referred to as stress.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. Stress**

Based on its basic concept, stress is categorized into several groups: stress as an external stimulus, stress as a response, stress as an interaction between individuals and their environment, and stress as a transaction between individuals and their environment (transactional) (Brough et al., 2009; Cox and Griffiths, 2010, in Biggs et al., 2017). The transactional theory states that psychological stress results from the relationship between individuals and their environment, which is perceived by individuals as a burden that exceeds their available resources and impacts their well-being. Therefore, stress emphasizes the phenomenological cognitive process, where individuals give meaning to their environment and interact with stress-inducing situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Lazarus (1993) stated that when someone evaluates a situation as a threat, challenge, or danger (stressor), it triggers the use of coping strategies to manage emotions or attempt to overcome the stressor. This coping process produces changes

in the interaction between individuals and their environment, which are then re-evaluated by individuals as either beneficial, detrimental, or unresolved. If resolving the stressor is assessed as beneficial, individuals will experience positive emotions. However, if the stressor remains unresolved or is deemed detrimental, individuals will consider alternative coping strategies to try to address the stressor. The intensity level of stress reactions is influenced by the role of appraisal or interpretation through the cognitive process of events perceived as stimuli (Biggs et al., 2017). Lazarus & Folkman (1984) called the process of individuals assessing the situations they face as cognitive appraisal.

Cognitive appraisal is divided into two stages:

a. Primary Appraisal

A process in which individuals evaluate the situations they face through a transaction between themselves and the condition, related to the impact of the situation on their well-being and the intensity of the emotions experienced. Based on this assessment, the transaction can be considered as having a positive impact, no impact at all, or as stress.

b. Secondary Appraisal

When a situation is perceived as stressful, individuals will think about the steps they can take to address it. This involves identifying and evaluating coping resources, situational factors, and methods previously used to deal with similar events.

c. Reappraisal

The coping process, supported by new information from the environment, produces repeated cognitive appraisals, where a situation is re-evaluated to determine whether coping efforts have been effective or whether the situation has become irrelevant or turned into something positive. While positive feelings may arise from successful adaptation, failed adaptation can prompt further coping efforts, with persistent failure triggering negative feelings and physiological disturbances.

In general, the stress and coping theory by Lazarus & Folkman (1984) emphasizes that stress is a continuous transactional cycle between individuals and their environment, perceived as a disruption to balance and responded to through adaptive processes to address the imbalance experienced by individuals.

Individual distress or a state of stress can generally result in decreased performance (Çöpürkaya et al., 2023; Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019; Oyewobi et al., 2020; Varma, 2023). On the other hand, according to Lazarus & Folkman (1984), in managing stress, individuals engage in cognitive and behavioral efforts that are effective in helping them achieve well-being. These efforts are referred to as coping strategies. Effective coping strategies can reduce stress and improve academic performance.

## 2. Coping

When situations in the primary appraisal are evaluated as sources of stress requiring effort to be managed or overcome, individuals engage in coping. Coping involves dynamic cognitive and behavioral efforts to address external and/or internal demands perceived as burdensome or beyond an individual's capacity. Coping strategies are categorized into two types: problem-focused coping (PFC), which concentrates on directly addressing the stressor, and emotion-focused coping (EFC), which aims to manage the emotions arising from the stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Several studies have evaluated the effectiveness of EFC and PFC, indicating that EFC is often considered a less adaptive form of coping because its outcomes frequently lead to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and dissatisfaction due to unresolved problems. Conversely, PFC is typically associated with more positive outcomes, particularly as it is linked to lower levels of emotional exhaustion. EFC may be effective in the short term when a situation is perceived as causing intense emotional distress, is difficult to control, and when available resources are insufficient to implement PFC (Addy et al., 2021; Biggs et al., 2017).

Returning to the phenomenon observed in the school where this research was conducted, although students in this school perceive their learning process as stressful and feel overwhelmed by the existing pressures, they have managed to achieve the learning demands. Moreover, the percentage of students successfully admitted to state or international universities consistently exceeds 90% annually.

Based on this phenomenon, the researcher is interested in exploring a clearer picture of the coping strategies employed by students to overcome the pressures they experience while still achieving outstanding performance.

## C. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative case study method. A case study is an in-depth investigation of a particular case involving specific subjects—such as individuals, organizations, communities, or events. Case studies can describe exceptional cases, typical cases, or deviant cases (Howitt, 2019).

In this study, the case of interest is the phenomenon of coping strategies employed by high-achieving students in addressing academic pressure within the learning environment of a prestigious boarding high school. Consequently, the research subjects are high-achieving students who participate as respondents, while the school serves as the context or setting that clarifies the situation and characteristics of the case being examined.

The research participants consist of students with the highest academic achievements at each grade level, totaling three individuals with the following composition: one overall top student from grade X (P1), one overall top student from grade XI (P2), and one overall top student from grade XII (P3).

To understand the coping strategies students employ based on their length of time in school and their experiences in dealing with stressful situations, this study

applies the transactional theory by Lazarus & Folkman (1984). This theory explains that the more frequently individuals engage in coping, the more resources they accumulate. If the coping strategies employed are effective, it can be assumed that students in grade XII possess more effective coping strategies compared to their younger counterparts.

The data in this study were collected using a qualitative interview method. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via the Zoom application to gather information about the students' coping strategies. The interview schedule was arranged based on mutual agreement between the researcher and the school.

The data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following the five stages outlined by Byrne (2022):

1. Transcribing Interviews: Manually transcribe the interview results, organize the documents into a single folder, and familiarize oneself with the collected data.
2. Coding: Identify and label patterns or consistent elements within the data that relate to the research subject.
3. Generating Themes: Group the codes into themes based on shared concepts found in the participants' statements.
4. Reviewing Themes: Evaluate the potential themes for relevance and coherence.
5. Naming and Defining Themes: Assign clear names to the themes and provide definitions to describe their essence.

#### D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the thematic analysis of the responses from the three participants, the following results were obtained:

**Table 1 Themes and Descriptions of Students' Coping Strategies**

Theme	Description
Students' Main Stressors	The overwhelming learning demands and difficulty in prioritizing tasks create confusion among students.
Students' Assessment of Stressors	Students perceive stressors as challenges that must be faced.
Students' Coping Resources	Students utilize more than one coping resource to deal with stressors.
Overview of Students' Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students use Emotional-Focused Coping when adapting to stressors.</li> <li>- Students employ <b>**Problem-Focused Coping**</b> when addressing specific stressors.</li> <li>- Students demonstrate the ability to choose adaptive coping strategies to handle diverse stressors.</li> </ul>

### 1. Main Stressors for Students

The learning demands that are more extensive compared to students of the same age in other schools.

*"What makes me feel pressured is the situation in school with too much to learn, because there are many subjects to study. I have to think about this lesson, that lesson, I have to socialize with friends, and take care of things outside of learning...sometimes it feels overwhelming, even when I'm alone".*

(P.3)

*"Sometimes, because of too many assignments, I just put them off and feel too lazy to do them. I get confused about which one to work on first."*

(P.1)

### 2. Students' Assessment of Stressors

Although students perceive the stressors as something pressuring, they view this pressure as a challenge that must be faced.

*"At first, I was like, 'How am I going to do this project?' But once I started, it felt normal, Ma'am. The project required me to find theories and related themes, so I ended up learning a lot of new things... it made me feel like, 'Come on, I can do this!'"*

(P.2)

*"Rather than not getting a grade, it's better to just do it. What's important is to submit it"*

(P.1)

### 3. Coping Resources Students

Have in Facing Stressors

*"Usually, I release my emotions with friends, we sing together, wash dishes, and then after that, we work on the assignments together"*

(P.1)

*"My friends in the dorm are really supportive. We make lists every month, like setting goals, trying to be better each time"*

(P.2)

*"I control my emotions, it's better if I stay quiet. I think it's better not to interact with others than to do something that could cause conflict. That way, we can support each other"*

(P.3)

### 4. Coping Strategy Description

In facing stressors, students apply various coping strategies depending on the situation. They engage in Emotional Focused Coping (EFC) when adapting to stressors, while Problem Focused Coping (PFC) is used to address the stressor. Students are able to choose adaptive coping strategies when confronting different stressors.

*"I control my emotions, it's better if I stay quiet. I think I can't interact with people rather than do something that could create conflict. It's important to me that I can't express all my feelings, especially the negative ones. ... My healing is by sleeping, washing clothes, or doing activities by myself. When I need alone time, I sleep, eat, walk, or read a book. If I want to heal with others, I talk to them. After healing, I get back to studying. ... My mood improves, and I feel more motivated to learn. I remind myself of the initial mindset that I must stay motivated to study."*

(P.3)

*"My friends are supportive in the dorm. We make lists every month, like setting goals and trying to do better each time. For example, 'don't just stay silent.' Some goals I've achieved, others not. I think it's because I haven't been able to reach them. When I don't meet my goals, I write them down again with explanations, like, 'I need to be more active in class.' The explanation could be 'try to be bolder when speaking.' When I achieve it, I'm very grateful. If I can, I try not to let goals slip and maintain them."*

(P.2)

*"Sometimes, because of so many tasks, I just procrastinate. I get confused about what to do first. I sometimes don't have the mood, so I prefer being alone. Eventually, I finish the tasks, but I do it last minute. But when I'm under pressure, my brain works. I think it's better to do the work and submit it than not do it at all. I know there's a lot to do, but I still procrastinate. Usually, I sleep or just take notes about what needs to be done, but avoid doing the tasks first. It depends on my mood. Sometimes, I realize I need to get it done now so I can relax later, so I do it, and finally finish it."*

(P.1)

This study aims to understand the coping strategies of high-achieving students in response to the learning environment at SMA X, a top-tier boarding school, based on the transactional theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984). According to the findings, high-achieving students at SMA X perceive the learning demands at school as a stressor. In addition to the academic demands, environmental factors such as the relationship with peers, which they feel is not conducive, also become a stressor for students. This aligns with previous research that revealed students experience stress due to various factors. Academic pressures, including exams, workload, and concerns about future careers, are major stress triggers (Varma, 2023). Other factors include relationship issues, environmental problems, and personal concerns (Lisnyj et al., 2023).

Although students perceive the learning environment and peer relationships as stressors, they view these stressors as challenges to be faced and resolved. Skinner et al. (2003) explain that coping can be adaptive depending on how individuals assess the stressors they encounter. Individuals who perceive stressors as challenges tend to experience more positive emotions compared to those who see stressors as threats.

This study also reveals that, in addition to cognitive self-ability, adolescents need support from peers as a resource that can assist in effective coping (Fahmi et al.,

2019; Kim, 2024; Lee, 2022; Oktavia & Urbayatun, 2019; Pointon-Haas et al., 2024; Stapley et al., 2023a).

In facing stressors, students initially focus on emotional resolution, which is called Emotion-Focused Coping (EFC). They engage in activities that help manage emotions, such as sleeping, cooking, or talking with other friends. The activities performed by the participants, who were all female, are consistent with the research by Gomez et al. (2021), which found that female students tend to engage in emotion-focused coping activities. After managing their emotions, students then shift their focus to problem resolution, known as Problem-Focused Coping (PFC). This differs from previous studies that showed that PFC was more effective in reducing stress than EFC (Biggs et al., 2017; Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019; Rachmawati et al., 2023). This study reveals that both EFC and PFC can work together as coping strategies to address the same stressor, each playing a different role.

This finding is supported by previous research that EFC and PFC can both effectively reduce stress levels in academic environments (Mahardhani et al., 2020; Parojenog et al., 2022; Stapley et al., 2023b). The study also reveals that as students progress to higher grade levels, they tend to make more coping efforts. This is reflected in the increasing coping efforts observed among the students.

The use of various coping strategies is supported by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who state that coping involves dynamic cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and/or internal demands perceived as burdensome. Therefore, the more frequently an individual copes, the more resources they accumulate, increasing their chances of engaging in effective coping. Senior students in grade XII, having spent more time in school compared to their younger peers, show that even though students face higher demands as they progress in grade levels, they can still achieve high performance. This is because the coping strategies they use are effective in reducing the negative feelings resulting from the stressors. The reduction in negative feelings enables students to focus better on their studies. This finding aligns with previous studies that show that a low perception of stress can improve students' academic performance (Basith et al., 2021; Bondarchuk et al., 2024).

## E. CONCLUSION

High-achieving students at SMA X possess a diverse range of coping resources to address the existing stressors. They opt to engage in Emotional Focused Coping (EFC) as an adaptation to the stressor before eventually moving on to Problem-Focused Coping (PFC). The variety of coping strategies they employ increases the chances of effective coping and minimizes the negative feelings that arise. This study reveals that with the right strategies, individuals can maintain their performance and cope with pressure from both internal and external sources. This research categorizes coping strategies into EFC and PFC, based on various coping classifications that have been previously established. To provide a more structured and clear understanding, future research could explain coping strategies based on the adaptive processes underlying them.

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