# Personality traits and stress coping strategies among Albanian young adulthoods

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## Abstract

*Personality is defined as a set of general, consistent, and distinct patterns of behavior displayed as a reaction to the environment.. As personality traits differ across individuals, so do stress coping strategies. Therefore some people use healthier coping strategies (e.g., Active coping, Positive reframing, Planning, Humor etc.) as compared to others, who might employ Self-distraction, Denial, Substance use, Behavioral disengagement etc. The present study aimed to assess whether personality traits (e.g., neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness etc.) determine the choice of a specific coping strategy (adaptive or maladaptive). Methodology The sample included 255 participants (Mage=26.45years, SD=4.4years), 169 women and 86 men. The measuring instrument was a self-report questionnaire; The Brief Big Five Inventory (BFI) questionnaire was used to measure the 5 personality traits while The Brief Cope questionnaire was used to measure the stress management techniques. Results showed that Neuroticism correlated positively with less adaptive coping strategies, such as self-blame (r=.32 p<.01), substance use*

*(r=.17, p<.01), venting (r=.15, p<.05) and behavioral disengagement (r=.12, p<.05) but negatively correlated with adaptive coping strategies such as humor (r= -.18, p<.01) and active coping (r= -.31, p<.01). Extraversion positively correlated with several adaptive coping strategies such as active coping (r=.19, p<.01), positive reframing (r=.21, p<.01) planning (r=.17, p<.01), humor (r=.27, p<.01) etc. Conscientiousness was also positively correlated with several adaptive coping strategies such as planning (r=.39, p<.01), religion (r=.16, p<.05) and active coping (r=.24, p<.01), and negatively correlated with maladaptive coping strategies such as denial (r= -.16, p<.05) and substance use (r= -.24, p<.01). Agreeableness was positively correlated with several adaptive coping strategies (e.g., use of instrumental support (r=.22, p<.01), active coping (r=.24, p<.01), and negatively correlated with maladaptive coping strategies such as behavioral disengagement, (r= -.12, p<.05) and substance use (r= -.15, p<.05). Openness to experience also showed positive significant relationships with several adaptive strategies such as active coping (r=.23, p<.01), positive reframing (r=.23, p<.01), planning (r=.27, p<.01), humor (r=.19, p<.01), etc.. Results supported the claim that personality characteristics are relevant in the choice of coping strategies, particularly as regards the distinction between healthy and unhealthy coping. Findings are discussed in the context of theoretical and practical implications.*

**Keywords:** Big Five, personality traits, coping strategies, individual differences

## Theoretical background

### Theories on coping strategies

What kinds of environmental events are typically cited as stress stimuli, or in Selye's terms, "stressors"? Lazarus and Cohen (1977) speak of three types: major changes, often cataclysmic and affecting large numbers of persons; major changes affecting one or a few persons; and daily hassles. As to the first, certain cataclysmic phenomena are usually treated as universally stressful and outside anyone's control. Included here are natural disasters, man-made castastrophes such as war, imprisonment, and uprooting and relocation. These may be prolonged events (e.g., imprisonment) or over quickly (earthquake, hurricane), although the physical and psychological aftermath of even a brief disaster can be extended over a long time.

During the last years, especially during the last few decades, there's been an increasing interest on the processes using by people coping with stress (Ogden, 2007). The starting point of this research is to analyze the concept of stress itself and coping, suggested by Lazarus (1996). Lazarus argued that stress consisted on three processes. The primary appraisal is the perception of the threat. The

secondary appraisal is the process of remebering a possible reaction to that threat, while facing it is the execution of that response. During all the while, individuals react to their evoriment including different ways of thinking, emotions and behaviours which are consistent with their personality traits and previous ways of coping (McCrae & Costa, 2003). So, Lazarus and Folkman, (1984) observed that the coping is a dynamic process which changes during the course of a stressful interaction between the individual and the environment.

The confrontation is defined by Lazarus as: "The process of managing the stress sources, which are considered as overwhelming to the individual's recoures and also as an effort to manage the demands of the surroundings as well as the internal ones" (Lazarus & Launier, 1978). In the context of the stress, coping reflects the ways the individuals interact with the stress sources in the effort to go back to some kind of normal functioning. This may include correcting or eliminating the problem, or changing the way a person thinks of a problem, or learning to tollerate and accepting it (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

Cohen and Lazarus (1979) defined the objectives of coping/managing as: 1) to reduce the difficult enviroment conditions and to increase the possibility to heal; 2) to regulate or to tolerate the negative events; 3) to preserve a positive self-image; 4) to maintain an emotional balance; and also 5)  to carry on satisfying relationships with others. Individuals prefer different managing techiques predisposed by specific personality features and more over, the personality searches for ways of unflexible managing (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). To study the process of coping, Lazarus and his colleagues developed a measure which was called types of management (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). This measure consisted on a series of assertions, each of one portrays the coping or the action people engage when under stress. The persons who answered tell that when techiques used in a specified stressful interaction, are used or not, make a valuation of the questions in Likter scale.

The evaluation in the ways of stress managing is the difference between two types or general techiques of facing. The first model of coping strategies is problem-focused coping, focusing on solving the problems or doing something to change the source of stress, and emotion-focused coping, focusing on reducing or managing negative state of emotions, which relate to (or are caused by) the situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

Even though most of stressors encourage both ways of facing, the techique focused on the problem tends to prevail when people think something constructive may be achieved. Meanwhile, the technique focused on emotion, tends to prevail when people feel that the stressor is something that has to be endured (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The difference between these two techniques is important according to Carver et al. (1989). Studies show that the responses on the techiques

of managing stress are generally more than two (Aldwin, Folkman, Schaefer, Coyne & Lazarus, 1980; Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Coyne, Aldwin, & Lazarus, 1981; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Parkes, 1984; Carver et al., 1989).

Also, there is evidence showing that facing is constant during all the period of a stressful event (Gil, Wilson & Edens, 1997; Powers, Gallagher-Thompson & Kraemer, 2003) and that people tend to use the same ways of facing in stressful situations (Moss & Holahan, 2003). Researchers have noticed that these other techniques strongly differ in character (Scheier, Weintraub & Carver, 1986).

Some of the answers focused on emotion include denial, some others include positive reframing and many others include the search for support. These answers differ very much from each other and more over, they might have different consequences on someone's success on managing (Carver et al., 1989). Also the coping strategy focused on the problem deserves a further investigation (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987). Problem-focused coping in itself, can include some special activities in the individual such as planning, active managing, asking for help, self-distraction, or simply compel themselves to wait before making a decision. All of these different techniques individuals use should be considered and measured separately (Carver et al., 1989). Carver and colleagues (1989), built the instrument to measure the differnt techniques individuals use when facing a potential stressor.

According to Carver et al., (1989), there are fourteen managing techiques (active management, instrumental support, emotional support, surrender, self-distraction, release of negative feelings, positive riconstruction, denial, acceptance, use of substances, humour, self-guilt and religion): Active management is the procces of trying to plan ahead to eleminate or improve stress's effects. Active management include direct action, increasing of someone's efforts and the struggle to develop a step-by-step facing technique. Active management is very similar to the core of problem-focused facing of Lazarus & Folkman (1984), but Carver et al. (1989) showed the differences of techniques in this wide category (Scheier & Carver, 1985).

Planning is thinking how to face a stressor. Planning includes the usage of action strategies and thinking on the steps that must be taken and how to best face the problem in order to eleminate it. This technique is also thought to be adabtale and useful in the facing process (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Another technique is the seek of social support for instrumental reasons, therefore asking for advice, help or information from the others. Another technique is seeking social support for emotional reasons, used as moral support, sympathy or understanding. These two techniques have separated functions, as the result of their concept defferecies. But, practically, they may very often occour at the same moment (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987).

The tendency to seek emotional support is a double-edge knife. It may seem functional in many ways. The individual who has become unsecure as the result of a stressful transaction, might get calmed using this managing technique. This technique may favour to get back in other techniques such as positive riconstruction, planning or active managing. On the other hand, sympathy sources might be used to release negative feelings (Carver et al., 1989). Studies have shown that using the technique of seeking emotional support to release negative feelings is not always adaptable (Billings and Moos, 1984, Costanza, Derlega, and Winstead, 1988, Tolor & Fehon, 1987). The notion that the technique of seeking emotional support isn't always useful, shows that some techniques of stress-answering might be ill-fitted (McCrae & Costa, 1986).

Another managing technique is surrender, which consists in reducing the efforts to face the stressor, even to give up objectives when dealing with stress factor. Surrender is reflected in a feeling of powerless. In theory, surrender might occour when people expect poor facing results. Self-distraction, another managing technique, is a variation of surrender. It is pretented that self-distraction occours when a situation prevents surrender (Carver, Peterson, Follansbee, & Scheier, 1983). Self-distraction occours in a large scale of activities (going to the movies, watching TV, reading or shopping), which help to deteach a person from thinking on the behaviuor dimension, or the objective in which the stressor interferes, but apparently, escaping from facing a problem, doesn't exterminate it (Scheier & Carver, 1977). The other technique individuals make use of is the release of negative feelings, therefore, expressing negative feelings to make them go away. But, according to Scheier & Carver (1977), this technique isn't very useful, as concentrating on the negative state, might increase the stress perception, also might deteach the individual from active management, positive reframingor planning, which are considered to be adaptable.

The deteachment from an objective, might be an adaptable answer sometimes, according to Klinger (1975), even though this answer often prevents adaptive facing (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Billings & Moos, 1984; Wills, 1986). Positive riconstruction, a technique, which is considered also by Lazarus & Folkman (1984), some kind of emotion-focused facing: facing in this case aims to manage the negative feelings instead of stressor itself. This technique is appreciated in positive terms, which aim to ridirect a person to continue or begin the active management, planning or positve riconstruction. Another technique is denial, the rejection to believe that a stressor does exist, or the effort to behave in such a way as the stressor didn't exist. Often, is suggested that denial is a useful technique which eases the facing (Breznitz, 1983). On the other hand, denial brings other problems, by rejecting the reality of the event, the event gets more serious, making it more difficult to face (Matthews, Siegel, Kuller, Thompson dhe Varat, 1983). A third

point of view is that denial is useful in the early phases of a stressful transaction, but prevents from facing it later (Mullen & Suls, 1982; Suls & Fletcher, 1985).

The opposite technique of denial is acceptance, a functional facing response. When the individual accepts the reality of a difficult situation, this seems to be engaging in the effort to take care of the situation. Acceptance seems to be more important when adapting with the stressor (Carver et al., 1989). The technique of using the substances is another response when facing a stressor by using alcohol or other drugs as a way to deteach from the stressor. Naturally this technique isn't adaptable according to Carver et al. (1989). Humor is another technique consisting in joking on the stressor, which brings positive effects on facing the stress.

Another technique individuals make use of when dealing with a stressful event is self-blaming, which relates with the guilt individuals feel toward particular behaviors or habits they engage to. According to Peterson, Schwartz dhe Seligman (1981), self-blaming is asociated to harmful psycological responses as distress (anxiety, fear). Shirom (2003), also showed that self-blaming, surrender and the use of substances are non-adaptable managing techniques. The last technique described by Carver et al. (1989) is turn on religion as a coping response through prayers or meditation. McCrae & Costa (1986), think that this technique may be of a great importance to many individuals. Religion may serve as a source for emotional support and as a mean for positive reframingand growth, however, its function depends by the individual itself (Carver et al., 1989).

*Personality and coping strategies*

The personality has a strong connection with the nature of coping as the personality inflicts on the experienced situation, which, in turn, inflicts on specific managing techniques (Bouchard, Guillemette, & Landry-Leger, 2004; Penley & Tomaka, 2002). The personality's influence on emotions and behaviors is especially clear on stressful situations, which allows the change on choosing the managing techniques (Strelau, 2001). The personality doesn't affect only the choice of ways of coping, but also the capability to put them in action (Vollrath, 2001).

Other studies have also shown that the five personality features are in strong connection with the managing techniques and that special personality features encourage specific behavior responses. In their research they also got to the conclusion that the Extraversion feature, Being Opened to Experiences, Politeness and Consciousness are positivily connected to active managing, acceptance, planning, seek of instrumental support, religion, release of negative feelings, humor and positive construction (Hooker, Frazier, dhe Monahan, 1994; McCrae & Costa, 1986; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Grant & Langan-Fox, 2007; Heslegrave & Colvin, 1998; Penley & Tomaka, 2002; Watson, Minzenmayer, dhe Bowler, 2006).

McCrae and John (1992), also showed that the expression of Being opened to experiences might lead to intelectual interests, that foresees the use of active managing techniques, positive riconstruction, acceptance, humor and self-distraction, which in return demand the capability to consider new perspectives. Some other studies have shown that the Extraversion feature is positively connected with active managing and positive valuation of the stressor, as well as the Neuroticism feature was positively connected to emotional support, self-distraction, self-blaming, denial and substances use (Hooker, Frazier, & Monahan, 1994; Watson & Hubbard, 1996; Vollrath, 2001; Velting, 1999).

Hooker and colleagues (1994) also showed that Politeness feature was negatively connected with managing techniques as self-blaming, surrender, substaces use and denial. In their study, O'Brein and DeLongis (1996), showed that Politeness feature was positively connected with emotional and instrumental support.

In their research, Connor-Smith and Flachsbart (2007), showed that Extraversion and Consciousness features predicted managing techniques such as active managing, planning and positive riconstruction, as well as Consciousness feature predicted resistance to surrender impulses. Meanwhile Being opened to experiences predicted techniques which demand the capability to consider new perspectives to unexpected events. Neuroticism feature predicted weak coping strategies to release negative feelings, emotional support and self-blaming. Hemenover and Deinstbier (1996) reached to the same conclusion in their research, that Neuroticism feature is connected to inadequate ways of coping. Also in another study, the high Counsciousness feature predicted low levels of surrender, self-blaming, substaces use and denial (Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik & Curran, 1999).

In the study of O'Brien and DeLongis (1996), Counsciousness feature showed a stronger connection with the active managing and planning, and negatively with self-blaming, self-distraction, surrender and substaces use. In the study of Watson and Hubbard (1999), being opened to experiences, was connected with planning, managing and positive riconstruction. Knoll, Rieckmann and Schwarzer (2005), got to the conclusion that Extraversion feature was connected with positive coping through the techniques of positive riconstruction, humor, instrumental and emotional support, while Being opened to experiences was positively connected with the active managing. They also showed that the techniques used by these two features are efficient and give positive results.