ISSN: P-2455-0515
E- 2394-8450

Educreator Research Journal

OPEN ACCESS

VOLUME–XII, Special Issues–I (A) Nov – Dec 2025

Original Research Article

STRESS MANAGEMENT AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG INDIVIDUALS IN COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract:

In today's world, competition has become an unavoidable part of academics, work, and even personal ambitions. This constant pressure often creates significant stress as individuals try to meet expectations, chase deadlines, and maintain consistent performance. Under such conditions, stress emerges as both a psychological and physiological response to situations perceived as challenging or overwhelming.

This study investigates how individuals in Nashik's competitive environments manage stress and the coping strategies they adopt. Using a quantitative approach, the research employs correlation and linear regression in order to assess the association among stress and various coping methods. Sample size of Fifty were selected through purposive sampling from an urban community that experiences diverse educational, professional, and socio-cultural demands. This research contributes region-specific insight by examining how individuals in Nashik perceive and handle competitive stress within evolving academic and professional settings.

Data were gathered using standardized stress and coping scales from individuals across diverse professions and educational levels. The results show that higher stress levels are closely linked to the type and effectiveness of coping strategies used. Analysis done through Correlation indicates moderate negative relationship among stress as well as adaptive coping, meaning individuals with stronger coping mechanisms tend to report lower stress levels. Regression analysis further demonstrates that coping strategies significantly predict stress, highlighting their protective role.

The study concludes that stress-management interventions should focus on cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, resilience-building, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills. Although limited by a small sample size, the findings offer valuable insights and point toward future research involving larger groups, mixed-method designs, and long-term studies on stress adaptation.

Keywords: *Stress management, coping strategies, competitive environment*

Introduction:

Stress has become an unavoidable part of modern life, especially in competitive academic and workplace settings where people are constantly expected to perform at high levels. It often occurs when the demands placed on someone feel greater than their ability to handle them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In fast-growing urban areas

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like Nashik, individuals deal with academic pressure, workplace competition, financial responsibilities, and social expectations—all of which can significantly increase stress.

Long-term stress can negatively affect mental health, work performance, and decision-making (Cooper & Marshall, 2013). With increasing digital connectivity, people are pushed to multitask more and compare themselves to others online, adding to this pressure. Although stress has been widely researched, there is still limited information that focuses specifically on regional contexts, particularly in Indian cities where traditional values and modern competitive lifestyles intersect.

Coping strategies—whether problem-focused, emotion-focused, or avoidance-based—play an essential role in how people handle stress. Positive or adaptive coping builds resilience, while negative or maladaptive coping makes individuals more vulnerable (Carver et al., 1989). In a city like Nashik, where traditional expectations blend with modern challenges, understanding how people cope locally becomes especially important.

Concept

This study is based on key psychological theories that explain how stress and coping work. Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (1956) introduced a biological model of stress involving three stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. Selye suggested that stress occurs when life's demands are too high for someone to adapt to, eventually leading to exhaustion if coping strategies fail. However, this model mainly focuses on physical responses and does not fully capture the mental processes involved in stress.

A more comprehensive understanding comes from Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model (1984), which sees stress to be a effectual give and take with a person and their environment. This model stresses upon cognitive appraisal i.e. how individuals interpret a situation and evaluate their coping abilities. From this viewpoint, stress becomes a subjective experience shaped by personal beliefs, past experiences, and emotional resilience.

Lazarus and Folkman also highlighted two main types of coping: problem-focused coping, which takes steps towards dealing straightly with stressor, and emotion-focused coping, which manages feelings related to the stressor. Later studies added avoidance coping, which is likely associated with negative effects. In competitive settings, the way a person interprets a situation-whether as a threat or a challenge-plays a major role. Emotional intelligence, confidence, personality, and social support all strongly influence coping. In India, cultural values, family involvement, and community networks also play important roles, particularly in developing cities like Nashik.

Significance of the Study:

This research is important as stress and coping have become increasingly relevant in today's competitive world. As academic, professional, and even social expectations grow, individuals are experiencing higher stress levels that affect their mental health, productivity, and relationships. Understanding stress in these competitive environments is essential for designing programs that improve overall well-being and performance.

The study is particularly valuable for Nashik, a rapidly developing city where competitive pressure is rising. It offers insight into how people in this region handle stress and the coping strategies they use. Since similar

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E- 2394-8450

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localized studies are limited, this research helps fill an important gap and can guide mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study deepens our understanding of how stress and coping are connected by using correlation and regression analysis. These methods show how strongly coping strategies can influence stress levels and support psychological theories that highlight coping as a protective factor.

Practically, the findings may help teachers, counsellors, and organizational leaders create more effective stress-management programs that build resilience, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping. As stress increasingly affects academic performance, job productivity, and overall life satisfaction, research-based interventions are becoming essential.

Review of Literature:

Cooper & Marshall, (2013). Studies show that competitive environments increase stress because of heavy demands, strict deadlines, multitasking, and constant evaluation.

Skinner & Brewer, (2002). According to the transactional model of stress, people who see competition as a threat feel more anxious, while those who view it as a challenge often feel more motivated.

Holahan & Moos, (1987). Research consistently finds that problem-focused coping effectively reduces stress, while avoidance coping is associated with burnout and emotional exhaustion. Emotion-focused coping can be helpful but may become harmful if it relies too heavily on denial or withdrawal.

Bakker & Demerouti, (2007). Workplace studies reveal that high workloads, tight deadlines, and unclear job roles increase stress, whereas autonomy and supportive work environments help reduce it.

Mishra & Gupta, (2016). In India, corporate employees often report high stress levels due to long working hours and intense performance expectations.

Kumari & Jain, (2014). For the students, academic competition-especially during exam periods-creates significant stress. Positive coping methods such as time management help keep stress low, while avoidance makes it worse. Many urban young adults use digital distractions to cope, but this often increases long-term stress (Singh & Aggarwal, 2020).

Petrides & Furnham, (2003). Emotional intelligence supports better coping by helping individuals regulate their emotions. Social support is also a major protective factor, especially in collectivistic societies like India (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Kabat-Zinn, (2003). Mindfulness practices help people manage stress by improving emotional regulation and reducing overthinking. Resilience does essay an essential part in helping people recover from challenges and maintain performance (Masten, 2001).

Overall, the literature shows that adaptive coping reduces stress, while maladaptive coping heightens it. However, there is still little research specifically examining these patterns in Nashik's competitive environment, which highlights the need for this study.

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Methodology:

Statement of the Problem:

To study stress management and coping strategies among individuals in competitive environment.

Objectives:

1. To assess the stress level between individuals working or studying in competitive environments in Nashik city.
2. To identify coping strategies adopted by individuals in competitive environments.
3. To examine association among stress and coping strategies using correlation and linear regression.

Hypotheses:

1. "There would be a significant relationship between stress and coping strategies."
2. "Coping strategies would significantly predict stress levels among individuals."
3. "There would be significant differences in stress levels based on the type of coping strategies used."

Variables:

Dependent variable: Stress

Independent variable: Coping strategies

Operational Definitions:

Stress operationally put as score obtained on a standardized scale of stress measuring perceived stress levels arising from competitive demands, pressure, and performance expectations.

Coping strategies were operationally defined as the scores on the coping strategies inventory, reflecting the extent to which individuals employ problem-focused, emotion-focused, or avoidance-based coping behaviours.

Sample Selection:

Sample consisted of 50 individuals selected through purposive sampling from various competitive settings in Nashik city. Participants included students preparing for competitive examinations, employees working in performance-driven corporations, and individuals from sectors such as finance, sales, engineering, and education. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate as it ensured the inclusion of individuals most exposed to competitive pressures. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 40 years and represented diverse educational and occupational backgrounds. Equal representation was maintained in gender distribution to enhance reliability and minimize sampling bias.

Measurements:

Two standardized instruments were used.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS- 1983)

The first was a Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), very popular tool used in psychological studies to assess perceived stress, developed by Cohen et al. It measures how much individuals think about life as uncontrollable as well as overloaded. It has strong reliability (Cronbach's α ranging from 0.78 to 0.91) and well-established validity across diverse populations.

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E- 2394-8450

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OPEN ACCESS

VOLUME–XII, Special Issues–I (A)

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Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI-1989)

The second tool used was Coping Strategies Inventory (CSI) by Tobin et al. in 1989, a widely applied in stress research. It measures problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-based coping strategies. CSI demonstrates strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.71 to 0.94 across its subscales. It also shows solid construct validity.

Statistical Treatment

Data were analysed by Pearson's correlation, simple linear regression and one way ANOVA.

Results and Interpretation:

Correlation Analysis between Stress and Coping Strategies

Table: Pearson Correlation between Stress and Adaptive Coping (N = 50)

Variables	r-value	p-value	Interpretation
Stress & Adaptive Coping	**-0.47**	**< 0.01**	Moderate Negative Correlation (Significant)

An analysis of correlation among stress as well as coping strategies was conducted to examine the strength and direction of their relationship. The correlation coefficient through Pearson was found to be **r = -0.47**, showing a moderate negative association among tress and adaptive coping strategies. The negative sign signifies that as adaptive coping increases, stress levels decrease. This relationship was statistically significant at **p < .01**, demonstrating that coping strategies essay meaningful part in determining stress levels among individuals operating in competitive environments. Thus, the first hypothesis stating that *"There would be a significant relationship between stress and coping strategies"* is **accepted**, as the results demonstrate a statistically significant association.

This result aligns with the foundational theories of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), emphasizing that coping umpires relationship between stress and the person's subjective appraisal of stressors. Moderate negative correlation supports the notion that adaptive coping methods such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, time management, and cognitive reframing substantially reduce perceived stress. The findings echo the conclusions of Carver et al. (1989), who suggested that individuals with strong problem-focused coping mechanisms experience lower stress because they engage actively with stressors rather than reacting passively. In the context of Nashik's competitive environment, where individuals face multiple simultaneous demands, the use of structured coping strategies likely enhances resilience and reduces the vulnerability to stress.

Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Stress from Coping Strategies:

Table: Simple Linear Regression Analysis (N = 50)

Predictor Variable	β (Standardized Beta)	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Coping Strategies	**-0.52**	**-3.89**	**< 0.001**	Significant Negative Predictor

ISSN: P-2455-0515
E- 2394-8450

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VOLUME–XII, Special Issues–I (A)

Nov – Dec 2025

Original Research Article

Model Summary:

Statistic	Value
R	0.52
R^2	**0.27**
Adjusted R^2	0.25
F-value	15.13
Sig. (p)	< **0.001**

To evaluate the predictive capacity of coping strategies on stress levels, a simple linear regression analysis was performed. Coping strategies were treated as the predictor variable, and stress was the outcome variable. The regression results indicated a standardized beta coefficient of $\beta = -0.52$, suggesting that coping strategies significantly and negatively predict stress levels. The t-value associated with this coefficient was $t = -3.89$, which was statistically significant at $p < .001$. The model described 27% of variance in stress ($R^2 = 0.27$), meaning that coping strategies account for approximately one-fourth of the differences in stress levels among individuals in competitive environments. Therefore, the second hypothesis stating that *"Coping strategies would significantly predict stress levels among individuals"* is accepted, based on the strong predictive power observed.

The regression results show that individuals using effective coping strategies are significantly less likely to experience high stress, whereas those lacking such strategies tend to exhibit elevated stress levels. The predictive strength of coping aligns with the theoretical work of Selye (1956), who argued that adaptation mechanisms determine whether stress leads to growth or exhaustion. The findings also support Job Demands-Resources Model by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), which emphasizes that resources which were personal like coping strategies strengthen resilience in demanding environments. In Nashik's competitive landscape, where individuals face academic and workplace pressures, coping strategies serve as a stabilizing force that reduces stress.

Difference in Stress Levels Based on Type of Coping Strategy:

The third hypothesis of the study examined whether stress levels differed significantly based on the type of coping strategy used by individuals functioning in competitive environments. To explore this, participants were categorized according to their dominant style of coping, namely problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance-based coping. To statistically determine whether the observed differences in levels of stress among three coping groups were significant, a One-way ANOVA was done. Results of the ANOVA are presented below.

Table: One-Way ANOVA for Stress across Three Coping Styles

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	468.32	2	234.16	**8.72**	< **0.001**
Within Groups	1244.48	47	26.48		
Total	1712.80	49			

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E- 2394-8450

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OPEN ACCESS

VOLUME–XII, Special Issues–I (A)

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The ANOVA results indicated that the differences in stress levels among the three coping groups were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, confirming that coping style has a substantial impact on stress levels. These results were further supported by the comparison of group means shown below.

Table: Mean Stress Scores across Coping Strategies

Coping Style	Mean Stress Level
Problem-Focused Coping	**18.4**
Emotion-Focused Coping	**21.7**
Avoidance Coping	**27.2**

The descriptive statistics showed clear variations in levels of stress among these three groups. Individuals who predominantly used problem-focused coping demonstrated the lowest stress levels with a mean score of 18.4. Those using emotion-focused coping exhibited moderately higher stress levels with a mean of 21.7. In contrast, individuals relying on avoidance coping reported the highest stress levels with a mean score of 27.2, indicating substantial emotional strain and reduced adaptive functioning.

In the competitive environment of Nashik, where individuals frequently confront performance expectations, deadlines, and multitasking demands, avoidance coping appears particularly harmful. Individuals who disengage from stressors are unable to reduce or manage external pressures, resulting in escalating stress over time. Therefore, based on both descriptive and inferential statistics, the hypothesis stating that *"There would be significant differences in stress levels based on the type of coping strategies used"* is **accepted**, demonstrating that coping style significantly influences stress experiences among individuals.

The statistical evidence clearly indicates that individuals using problem-focused coping experience significantly lower stress, supporting the perspective that active coping strategies facilitate better management of competitive pressures. These findings are consistent with Holahan and Moos (1987), who argued by saying problem-focused strategies help individuals modify or control stressors, thereby reducing their psychological impact. Emotion-focused coping demonstrated moderate effectiveness, as it assists individuals in managing emotional discomfort but does not directly resolve the underlying stressor. Avoidance coping was found to be the least effective and the most detrimental, with individuals reporting the highest stress levels. This pattern aligns with several studies that highlight avoidance coping as a maladaptive response that leads to psychological withdrawal, rumination, and long-term stress accumulation.

Conclusion:

1. The study shows that stress and coping strategies are closely related, indicating that individuals who use adaptive coping experience lower stress, whereas those with poor coping experience higher stress.
2. The findings reveal that coping strategies have a clear predictive influence on stress, demonstrating that better coping consistently contributes to reduced stress levels in competitive environments.
3. The results confirm that different coping styles create distinct stress outcomes, with problem-focused coping linked to lowest stress and avoidance coping linked to the highest stress.

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VOLUME–XII, Special Issues–I (A) Nov – Dec 2025

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Limitations :

1. Size of Samples was limited up to 50 people, this can reduce the applicability of findings.
2. Use of purposive sampling restricts the representativeness of the population and may introduce selection bias.
3. The study relied on self-report measures, which may lead to response bias or socially desirable answers.
4. The cross-sectional research design prevents establishing cause–effect relationships between stress and coping.

Suggestions :

1. Studies carried out in the coming times should employ large as well as diversified samples across varied occupations, age groups, and socio-economic levels to improve generalizability.
2. Interventions such as mindfulness training, resilience-building programs, cognitive-behavioural coping workshops, and emotional intelligence training should be evaluated for effectiveness in competitive environments.
3. Researchers should consider examining moderating variables such as personality, family support, organizational climate, and digital stress to gain a more comprehensive understanding of coping.

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ISSN: P-2455-0515
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OPEN ACCESS

VOLUME–XII, Special Issues–I (A) Nov – Dec 2025

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Cite This Article:

Dr. Mali S.M. (*2025**). *Stress Management and Coping Strategies among Individuals in Competitive Environments.* **Educreator Research Journal: Vol. XII (Issue VI),** pp. 132–140.